

THE ARGOSY.

MARCH 1, 1870.

BESSY RANE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "EAST LYNNE."

PART THE FIRST.

CHAPTER VII.

AFTER THE FUNERAL.

THE two guests, Sir Nash Bohun and his son, were departing from Dallory Hall. They had arrived the previous afternoon in time to attend the funeral, had dined and slept, and were now going again. The coming at all had originated with Sir Nash. In his sympathy with the calamity—the particulars of which had been written to him by his nephew, Arthur Bohun—Sir Nash had proposed to show his concern and respect for the North family by coming with his son to attend the funeral. The offer was accepted: albeit Mrs. North was not best pleased to receive them. For some cause or other, Madam had never been solicitous to court intimacy with her first husband's brother: when thrown into his society, there was something in her manner that almost seemed to say she did not feel at ease with him.

Neither at the dinner last night nor at the breakfast this morning, had the master of the house been present: the entertaining of the guests had fallen on Richard North as his father's representative. Captain Bohun was of course with them; also the rest of the family, including Madam. Madam played her part gracefully in a full suit of mourning: black crape elaborately set off with jet. For once in her life she was honest, and did not affect to feel the grief for Edmund that she would have felt for a son.

Sitting disconsolately before the open window of his parlour, was Mr. North. His new black clothes looked too large for him, his slippers were down at heel, his whole air was that of one who seems to have lost interest in the world. It is astonishing how aged, as compared with other moments, men will look in their seasons of abandonment. While we battle with our cares, they spare in a degree the face: but in the abandonment of despair, when all around seems dreary, and

we are sick and faint because to fight longer seems impossible, look at the poor sunken face then!

The room was dingy; it has already been said; rather long, but narrow. The door opened at the end, the window faced it. The fireplace was in the middle on the left; opposite to it an old open secretaire, filled with seeds and papers pertaining to gardening, stood side by side with a closet door. This closet—which was however more of a small shut-in passage than a closet—had an opposite door opening to the dining-room. But, if the parlour was in itself dingy, the capacious window and the prospect on which it looked, brightened it. Stretching out before it, broad and large, was the gay parterre of many-coloured flowers, Mr. North's only delight for years past. In the cultivation of these flowers, he had found a refuge, a sort of shelter from the consciousness of disappointment that was ever upon him, from life's daily vexations and petty cares. Heaven is all-merciful, and some counterbalancing interest to grievous and long-continued sorrow is often supplied. "She wants me to give up my garden; but I should die; I should die, Dick," Mr. North said one day imploringly to his son Richard after a dispute with Madam. Such disputes were frequent. And yet—could it be properly called dispute when the railing and reproach were all on one side? Madam wanted money perpetually; money and money, nothing but money; and when her husband avowed—with far more deprecation than he could have used to any other woman on earth—that he was unable to furnish it, she abused him. "Give up your expensive garden," was often the burthen of her cry; and in very fear, as it seemed, lest he should have to give it up, he had yielded so far as gradually to reduce his staff of gardeners to two. "On my word, I think it is the garden and its care that keeps life in him," Richard North had exclaimed in a confidential moment to Mrs. Gass. "Then, Mr. Richard, sir," was the answer, "let him always have it; you and me can take care of so much as that." Richard nodded. There were times when circumstances compelled him to entrust home secrets to Mrs. Gass—and he might have had a worse depository.

Mr. North sat looking at his flowers. He had been sitting there just as he was for the past hour, buried in reflections that were not pleasant, and the morning was getting on. He thought of his embarrassments—those applications for money from Madam, that he strove to hide from his well-beloved son Richard, and that made the terror of his life. They were apt to come upon him at the most unexpected times, in season and out of season; it seemed to him that he was never free from them; that he could never be sure at any minute she would not come down upon him the next. For the past few days the house had been, so to say, sacred from these carping concerns; even she had respected the sorrow in it; but with this morning, the return to everyday life, business and the world resumed its sway. Mr. North was

looked upon as a man perfectly at his ease in money matters; "rolling in wealth" people would say, as they talked of the handsome portion his two daughters might expect on their wedding-day. Local debts, the liabilities of ordinary, passing life, were kept punctually paid; Richard saw to that; and perhaps no one in the whole outer world, save Mrs. Gass, suspected the truth and the embarrassment. Mr. North thought of his other son, he who had gone from his view for ever; but the edge of the grief was wearing off, though he was as eager as ever to find out the writer of the anonymous letter.

But there is a limit to all things—I don't know what would become of some of us if there were not—and the mind cannot dwell for ever upon its own bitterness. Unhappy topics, as if in very fatigue, gradually drifted away from Mr. North's mind, and were replaced by loving thoughts of his flowers. How could it be otherwise, when their scent came floating to him through the broad open window in a delicious sea of perfume. The assorted colours charmed the eye, the sweet aroma took captive the senses. Spring flowers, all; and simple ones. It was like a many-hued plain; and further on, beyond the trees that bounded the grounds, a fine view was obtained of the open country over Dallory Ham. Hills and dales, woods and sunny plains, with here and there a gleam of glistening water, lay underneath the distant horizon. Sir John looked not at the landscape, which was a familiar book to him, but at his flowers. The spring had been continuously cold and wet, retarding the appearance of these early flowers to a very remarkably late period. For the past week or two the weather had been lovely, but with a summer brightness, and the flowers seemed to have sprung up all at once. Hyacinths, blue, pink, white, purple; gillyflowers in all their rich shades; white daffodils; primroses, double and single; cowslips and polyanthus, and so on. Just as he chose the most simple flowers to cultivate, so he called them all by their more simple and familiar names. Madam turned up her nose at both in contemptuous derision; sometimes speaking in society of Mr. North's "vulgar cottage garden." A little later, the tulip beds would be in bloom. A rare collection, that; a show for the world to flock to. Great people came boldly inside; small ones would peep through the shrubs and over the railings, sniffing the sweet scent, and saying the ground was like a many-hued carpet of gorgeous colours. Later on still, the roses would be out, and many thought they were the best show of all. And so the year went on, the flowers replacing each other in their loveliness.

Sadness sat on them to-day: for we see things you know in accordance with our own mood, not with their actual brightness. Mr. North rose with a sigh and stood at the open window. Only that very day week, about this time in the morning, his eldest son had stood there with him side by side. For this was the eighth of May. "Poor fellow!" sighed the father, as he thought of this.

Some one went sauntering down the path that led round from the front of the house, and disappeared beyond the trees: a short, slight young man. Mr. North recognized him for Sidney: Madam's son as well as his own: and he heaved a sigh almost as profound as the one he gave to the dead Edmund. Sidney North was dreadfully dissipated, and had caused already a good deal of trouble. It was suspected—and with truth—that some of Madam's superfluous money went to this son. She had brought him up badly, fostering his vanity, and indulging him in everything. By the very way in which he walked now—his head hanging moodily down, his gait slouching, his hands thrust into his pockets, Mr. North judged him to be in some dilemma. He had not wished him to be called home for the funeral; no, though the dead had stood to him as half-brother; but Madam took her own way and wrote for him. "He'll be a thorn in her side if he lives," thought the father, his reflections unconsciously going out to that future time when he himself should be no more.

The door opened, and Richard came in. Mr. North stepped back from the window at which he had been standing.

"Sir Nash and his son are going, sir. You will see them first, will you not?"

"Going! going already. Why—I declare it is past eleven! Bless me! I hope I have not been rude, Dick. Where are my boots?"

The boots stood at hand, ready for him. He put them on in a scuffle, and hid his slippers out of sight in the closet. What with his present grief, and what with a disinclination for society, or, as he called it, company, that had been for some time growing upon him, Mr. North had held aloof from his guests. But he was one of the last men to show incivility, and it suddenly struck him that perhaps he had been guilty of it.

"Dick, I suppose I ought to have been at the breakfast-table."

"Not at all, my dear father; not at all. Your remaining in privacy is perfectly natural, and I am sure Sir Nash feels it to be so. Don't disturb yourself: they will come to you here."

Almost as he spoke they came in, Captain Bohun with them. Sir Nash was a very fine man with a proud face, that put you in mind at once of Arthur Bohun's, and of the calmest, pleasantest, most courteous manners possible. His son Thomas was not in the least like him; a studious, sickly man, his health delicate, his dark hair scanty. James Bohun's time was divided between close classical reading, and philanthropic pursuits. He strove to have what he called a mission in life: and to make it one that might do him some service in the next world.

"I am so very sorry! I had no idea you would be going so soon: I ought to have been with you before this," began Mr. North in a flutter.

But the baronet laid his hands upon him kindly, and calmed the storm. "My good friend, you have done everything that is right and hospitable. I would have stayed a few hours longer with you, but James has to be in London this afternoon to keep an engagement."

"It is an engagement that I cannot well put off," interposed James Bohun in his small voice that always sounded too weak for a man. "I would not have made it, had I known what was to intervene."

"He has to preside at a public missionary meeting," explained Sir Nash. "It seems to me that he has something or other of the kind on hand every day in the year. I tell him that he is wearing himself out."

"Not every day in the year," spoke the son, as if taking the words literally. "This is the month for such meetings, you know, Sir Nash."

"You do not look strong," observed Mr. North, studying James Bohun.

"Not strong in appearance perhaps, but I'm wirey, Mr. North: and we wirey fellows last the longest. What sweet flowers those are," added Mr. Bohun, stepping to the threshold of the window. "I could not dress myself this morning for looking at them. I longed to put the window open."

"And why did you not?" sensibly asked Mr. North.

"I can't do with the early morning air, sir. I don't accustom myself to it."

"A bit of a valetudinarian," remarked Sir Nash.

"Not at all, father," answered the son. "It is well to be cautious."

"I sleep with my window open, James, summer and winter. Well, well, we all have our different tastes and fancies. And now, my good friend," added the baronet, taking the hands of Mr. North, "when will you come and see me? A change may do you good."

"Thank you; not just yet. Thank you all the same, Sir Nash, but—later perhaps," was Mr. North's answer. He knew that the kindness was meant, the invitation sincere; and of late he had grown to feel grateful for any shown to him. Nevertheless he thought he should never accept this.

"I will not receive you in that hot, bustling London: it is getting to be a penance to myself to stay there. You shall come to my place in Kent, and be as quiet as you please. You've never seen Peveril: it cannot boast the charming flowers that you show, but it is worth seeing. Promise to come."

"If I can. Later. Thank you, Sir Nash; and I beg you and Mr. Bohun to pardon me for all my seeming discourtesy. It has not been meant as such."

"No, no."

They walked through the hall to the door, where Mr. North's carriage waited. The large, shut-up carriage. Some dim idea was pervading

those concerned that to drive to the station in an open dog-cart, would be hardly the right thing for these mourners after the recent funeral.

Sir Nash and his son stepped in, followed by Captain Bohun and Richard North, who would accompany them to the station. As Mr. North turned in-doors again after watching the carriage away, he ran against his daughter Matilda, resplendent in glittering black silk and jet, with endless chains of jet on her head and neck and arms and skirts.

"They have invited you to visit them, have they not, papa?"

"They have invited me—yes. But I shall be none the nearer going, Matilda."

"Then I wish you would, for I want to go," she returned, speaking imperiously. "My uncle Nash asked me. He asked mamma, and said would I accompany her: and I should like to go. Do you hear, papa? I should like to go."

It was all very well for Miss Matilda North to say "My Uncle Nash." Sir Nash was no relation to her whatever: but that he was a baronet, she might have been the first to remember it.

"You and your mamma can go," said Mr. North with animation, as the seductive vision of the house relieved of Madam's presence for an indefinite period, arose mentally before him.

"But mamma says she shall not go."

"Oh does she?" he cried, his spirits and the vision sinking together. "She'll change her mind perhaps, Matilda. I can't do anything in it, you know."

As if to avoid further colloquy, he passed on to his parlour and shut the door sharply. Matilda North turned into the dining-room, her handsome black silk train following her, her discontented look preceding her. Just then Mrs. North came down stairs, a coquettish, fascinating sort of black lace hood on her head, one she was in the habit of wearing in the grounds. Matilda North heard the rustle of the robes, and looked out again.

"Are you going to walk, mamma?"

"I am. Have you anything to say against it?"

"It would be all the same if I had," was the pert answer. Not very often did Matilda North gratuitously beard her mother; but she was in an ill humour: the guests had gone away much sooner than she had expected or wished, and Madam had vexed her.

"That lace hood is not mourning," resumed Miss Matilda North, defiantly viewing Madam from top to toe.

Madam turned the hood and the haughty face it encircled on her presuming daughter. The look was enough in itself: and what she might have said was interrupted by the approach of Bessy Rane.

"Have you any particular orders to give this morning, Madam?" she asked of her step-mother—whom she as often called Madam as

Mamma, the latter fond word never meeting with fond response from Mrs. North.

"If I have I'll give them later," imperiously replied Madam, sweeping out at the hall door.

"What has angered her now?" thought Bessy. "I hope and trust it is nothing connected with papa. He has enough trouble now without having to bear ill temper."

Bessy North was housekeeper. And a fine time she had of it! Between Madam's capricious orders, issued at all sorts of inconvenient hours, and the natural resentment of the servants, a less meek and patient spirit would have been worried beyond bearing. Bessy made herself the scape-goat; labouring, both by substantial help and by soothing words, to keep peace in the household. None knew how much Bessy did, or the care that was upon her. Miss Matilda North had never soiled her fingers in her life, never done more than ring the bell with a dash, and issue her imperious orders after the fashion of Madam, her mother. The two half-sisters were a perfect contrast. Certainly they presented such outwardly, as witness this morning: the one not unlike a peacock, her ornamented head thrown up, her extended train trailing, and her odds and ends of gleaming jet; the other a meek little woman in a black gown of some soft material with a bit of quiet crape upon it, and her smooth hair banded back—for she had put it plain to-day.

On her way to the kitchens, Bessy halted at her father's sitting-room and opened the door quietly. Sir John was standing against the window-frame, half inside the room half out of it.

"Can I do anything for you, papa?"

"There's nothing to do for me, child. What time do we dine to-day, Bessy?" he asked after a pause.

"I suppose at six. Mrs. North has not given contrary orders."

"Very well. I'll have my bit of luncheon in here, child."

"To be sure. Dear papa, you are not looking well," she added, advancing to him.

"No? Looks don't matter much, Bessy, when folks get to be as old as I am. A thought comes over me at odd moments—that it is good to grow ugly, and yellow, and wrinkled. It makes us wish to become young and fair and pleasant to the sight again: and we can only do that through immortality. Through immortality, child."

Mr. North lifted his hand, the fingers of which had always now a trembling sort of movement in them, to his shrivelled face, as he repeated the concluding words, passing it twice over the weak, scanty brown hair that time and care had left him. Bessy kissed him fondly and quitted the room with a sigh, one sad thought running through her mind.

"How sadly papa is breaking!"

Mrs. North swept down the broad gravel walk leading from the entrance door, until she came to a path on the left, which led to the covered portion of the grounds. Not covered by any roof; but the trees in places here grew so thick that shade might be had at midday. This part of the grounds was near the dark portion of the Dallory highway already mentioned (where Jelly had surprised her mistress and Oliver Rane in the moonlight the past night), only the boundary hedges being between them. Thickets of shrubs were there; hedges of laurel, privet, sweet-briar, clustering trees, their branches meeting over-head. Dark grottos nestled at ends of walks, covert benches were hidden in corners. It was a sweet spot, affording retirement from the world, shelter from the fierce rays of the burning sun. Madam was fond of frequenting this spot: and all the more so because sundry loop-holes gave her the opportunity of peering out on the world. She could see all who passed to and from the Hall, without being herself seen. One high enclosed walk was especially liked by her; ensconced within its shade, quietly resting on one of its rustic seats, she could hear as well as see. Before she had quite gained this walk, however, her son Sidney crossed her path. A young man of twenty now, undersized, insufferably vain, fast, and conceited. His face might be called a "pretty" face: his auburn curls were arranged after the models in a hair-dresser's window; his very blue unmeaning eyes had no true look in them. Sidney North was like neither father nor mother; like nobody but his own contemptible self. Madam looked upon him as next door to an angel; he was her well-beloved. There can be no blindness equal to that of a doting mother.

"My dear, I thought you had gone with them to the station," she said.

"Didn't ask me to go; Dick and Arthur made room for themselves, not for me," responded Sidney, taking his pipe from his mouth to speak, and his voice was as consequential as his mother's.

A frown crossed Madam's face. Dick and Arthur were rather in the habit of putting Sidney in the shade, and she hated them for it. Arthur was her own son, but she had never regarded him with any sort of affection.

"I'm going back this afternoon, mamma."

"This afternoon! No, my boy; I can't part with you to-day."

"Must," laconically responded Sydney, puffing at his pipe. And Madam had got to learn that it was of no use saying he was to stay if he wanted to go. "How much tin can you let me have?"

"How much do you want?"

"As much as you can give me."

His demands for money seemed to be as insatiable as Madam knew her husband found hers. The fact was beginning to give her some concern. Only two weeks ago she had despatched him all she could afford; and now here he was, asking again. A slight frown crossed her brow.

"Sidney, you spend too much."



"A frown crossed Madam's face."

"Must do as others do," responded Sidney.

"But my sweet boy I can't let you have it. You don't know the trouble it causes."

"Trouble!—with those rich North works to draw upon!" cried Sidney. "The governor must be putting by mines of wealth."

"I don't think he is, Sidney. He pleads poverty always; says we drain him. I suppose it's true."

"Flam! All old paters cry that. Look at Dick—the loads of gold he must be netting. He gets his equal share they say; goes thirds with the other two."

"Who says it?"

"A fellow told me so yesterday. It's an awful shame that Dick should be a millionaire, and I obliged to beg for every paltry coin I want! There's not so many years between us."

"Dick has got his footing in at the works, you see," observed Madam. "Let him! I'd not have *you* degrade yourself to it for the world. He's fit for nothing but work; been brought up to it; and we can spend."

"Just so," complacently returned the young man. "And you must shell out liberally for me this afternoon, mamma."

With no further ceremony of adieu or apology, Mr. Sidney North sauntered away. Madam proceeded to her favourite shaded walk, where she kept her eyes on all sides for intruders, friends or enemies. On this occasion she had the satisfaction of being gratified.

Her arms folded over the black lace shawl she wore, its hood gathered on her head, altogether very much after the fashion of a Spanish mantilla, and the gown train with its crape and jet falling in stately folds behind her, Madam had been pacing this retreat for the best part of an hour, when she caught sight, through the interstices of the leaves, of two ladies slowly approaching. The one she recognized at once as Mrs. Cumberland; the other she did not recognize at all. "What a lovely face!" was her involuntary thought.

A young, fair, lovely face. The face of Ellen Adair.

CHAPTER VIII.

MADAM'S LISTENING CLOSET.

HOLDING herself, as she did, so entirely aloof from her neighbours, there was little wonder in Madam's having remained unconscious of the fact that some months ago, nearly twelve now, a young lady had come to reside with Mrs. Cumberland. Part of the time Mrs. Cumberland had been away. Madam had also been away: and when at home her communication with Dallory and Dallory Ham consisted solely in being whirled through its roads in a carriage: no one in-doors

spoke unnecessarily in her hearing of any gossip connected with those despised places; and to church she rarely went, for she did not get up in time. And so the sweet girl who had for some time now been making Arthur Bohun's heart's existence, had never yet been seen or heard of by his mother.

For Mrs. Cumberland to be seen abroad so early was something marvellous; indeed she was rarely seen abroad at all. On this morning she came out of her room at half-past eleven o'clock, dressed for a walk; and bade Ellen Adair make ready to accompany her. Ellen obeyed, silently wondering. The truth was, Mrs. Cumberland had picked up a very unpleasant doubt the previous day, and would give the whole world to lay it to rest. It was connected with her son. His assurances had partly pacified her, but not quite: and she determined to get a private word with Mr. North. Ellen, walking by her side along the road, supposed they were going into Dallory. Mrs. Cumberland kept close to the hedge for the sake of the shade: as she brushed the bench in passing, where she had sat the past night, a slight shudder took her frame. Ellen did not observe it: she was revelling in the beauty of the sweet spring day. The gates of Dallory Hall gained, Mrs. Cumberland turned in. Ellen Adair wondered more and more: but Mrs. Cumberland was not one to be questioned at will on any subject.

On, they came, Madam watching with all her eyes. Mrs. Cumberland was in her usual black silk attire, and walked with the slow step of an invalid. Ellen wore a morning dress of lilac muslin. It needed not the lilac parasol she carried to reflect an additional lovely hue on that most lovely face. A stately, refined girl, as Madam saw, with charming manners, the reverse of pretentious.

But as Madam, fascinated for once in her life, gazed outwards, a certain familiarity in the face dawned upon her senses. That she had seen it before, or one very like it, became a conviction. "Who on earth is she?" murmured the lady to herself—for Madam was by no means stilted in her phrases at leisure moments.

"Are you going to call at the Hall, Mrs. Cumberland?" enquired Ellen, venturing to ask the question at length in her increasing surprise. And every word could be heard distinctly by Madam, for they were nearly close.

"I think so," was the answer, given in a hesitating tone. "I—I should like to tell Mr. North that I feel for his loss."

"But is it not early to do so—both in the hour of the day and after the death?" rejoined Ellen, with deprecation.

"For a stranger it would be; for me, no. I and John North were as brother and sister once. Besides, I have something else to say to him."

Had Miss Adair asked what the something else was—which she

would not have presumed to do—Mrs. Cumberland might have replied that she wished again to enlist the Hall's influence on behalf of her son, now that Mr. Alexander was about to leave. A sure indication that it was *not* the real motive that was drawing her to the Hall, for she was one of those reticent women who rarely, if ever, observe open candour even to friends. Suddenly she halted.

"I prefer to go on alone, Ellen. You can sit down and wait for me. There are benches about in the covered walks."

Mrs. Cumberland went forward. Ellen turned back and began to walk towards the entrance gates with the slow, lingering step of one who waits. Mrs. Cumberland had got well on, when she turned and called.

"Ellen."

But Ellen did not hear. She had her face turned the other way.

"Ellen! Ellen Adair!"

A loud call, this, echoing on the warm summer air, echoing on the curious ears covered by the lace mantilla. Mrs. North gave a quick, sharp start. It looked very like a start of terror.

"Ellen Adair!" she repeated to herself, her hungry eyes, hungry in their fear, flashing out on the beautiful face, to see whether she could track home the resemblance *now*. "Ellen Adair? Good heavens!"

Ellen had turned at once. "Yes, Mrs. Cumberland?"

"Do not go within view of the road, my dear. I don't care that all the world should know I am making a call at Dallory Hall. Find a bench and sit down, as I bade you."

Obedient, as it was in her nature to be, the young lady turned promptly into one of the side paths, which brought her within nearer range of Madam's view. She, Madam, with a face from which every atom of colour had faded, leaving it white as ashes, stood still as a statue, like one confounded.

"I see the likeness; it is to *him*," she muttered. Can he have come home?"

Ellen Adair passed out of sight and hearing. Madam, shaking herself from her fear, turned with stealthy steps to seek the house, keeping in the private paths as long as might be: which was a more circuitous way. Madam intended, unseen, to make a third at the interview between her husband and Mrs. Cumberland. The sight of that girl's face had frightened her. There might be treason in the air.

Mrs. Cumberland was already in Mr. North's parlour. Strolling out amidst his flowers, he had encountered her in the garden, and taken her in through the open window. Madam, arriving a little later, passed through the hall to the dining-room. Rather inopportunately, there sat Bessy, busy with her housekeeping account books.

"Take them elsewhere," said Madam, with an imperious sweep of the hand.

She was not in the habit of giving a reason for any command whatever: let it be reasonable or unreasonable, all to be done, was to hear and obey. Bessy gathered her books up in her black apron, and went away, Madam shooting the bolt of the door after her.

Then she stole across the soft Turkey carpet and slipped into the closet already spoken of, that formed a communication (never used as such) between the dining-room and Mr. North's parlour. The door opening to the parlour was unlatched and had been ever since he put his slippers inside it an hour before. When her eyes became accustomed to the closet's darkness, Madam saw them lying there; she also saw one or two of his old brown gardening coats hanging on the pegs. Against the wall was a narrow table with an unlocked desk upon it, belonging to herself. It was clever of Madam to keep it there. Opening the lid silently, she pulled up a few of its valueless papers, and let them stick out. Of course, if the closet were suddenly entered from the parlour—a most unlikely thing to happen, but Madam was cautious—she was only getting something from her desk. In this manner she had occasionally made an unsuspected third at Richard North's interviews with his father. Letting the lace hood slip off, Madam bent her ear to the crevice of the unlatched door, and stood there listening. She was under the influence of terror still: her lips were drawn back, her face wore the hue of death.

Apparently the ostensible motive of the interview—Mrs. Cumberland's wish to express her sympathy for the blow that had fallen on the Hall—was over; she had probably also been asking for Mr. North's influence to push her son. The first connected words Madam caught, were these.

"I will do what I can, Mrs. Cumberland. I wished to do it before, as you know. But Mrs. North took a dislike—I mean took a fancy to Alexander."

"You mean took a dislike to Oliver," corrected Mrs. Cumberland. "In the old days, when you were John North without thought of future grandeur, and I was Fanny Gass, we spoke out freely to each other."

"True," said poor Mr. North. "I've not had such good days since. Ah, what a long while it seems to look back to! I have grown into an old man, Fanny, older in feeling than in years; and you—you wasted the best days of your life in a hot and pestilential climate."

"Pestilential in places and at seasons," corrected Mrs. Cumberland. "My husband was stationed in the beautiful climate of the Blue Mountains, as we familiarly call the region of the Neilgherry Hills. It is pleasant there."

"Ay, I've heard so. Get the cool breezes, and all that."

"People used to come up there from the hot plains to regain their wasted health," continued Mrs. Cumberland, whose thoughts were apt to

wander back to the earlier years of her exile. "Ootacamund is resorted to there, just as the colder sea-side places are, here. But I and Mr. Cumberland were stationary."

"Ootacamund?" repeated Mr. North, struck with the name. "Ootacamund was where my wife's first husband died; Major Bohun."

"No, he did not die there," quietly rejoined Mrs. Cumberland.

"Was it not there? Ah well, it does not matter. One is apt to confuse these foreign names and places together in the memory."

Mrs. Cumberland made no rejoinder, and there ensued a momentary silence. Madam, who with the mention of the place, Ootacamund, bit her lip almost to bleeding, bent forward and looked through the opening of the door. She could just see the smallest portion of the cold calm grey face, and waited in sickening apprehension of what the next words might be. They came from Mrs. Cumberland and proved an intense relief; for the subject was changed for another.

"I am about to make a request to you, John: I hope you will grant it for our old friendship's sake. Let me see the anonymous letter that proved so fatal to Edmund—little Neddums, as I and your wife used fondly to call him in his babyhood. Every incident connected with this calamity is to me so full of painful interest!" she continued, as if seeking to apologise for her request. "As I lay awake last night, unable to sleep, it came into my mind that I would ask you to let me see the letter."

"You may see it, and welcome," was Mr. North's ready reply, as he unlocked a drawer in the old secretaire—bureau, he always called it—and handed the paper to her. "I only wish I could show it to some purpose—to somebody who would recognize the handwriting. You won't do that."

Mrs. Cumberland answered by a sickly smile. Her hands trembled as she took the letter, and Mr. North noticed how white her lips had become—as if with some inward suspense or emotion. She studied the letter well; reading it three times over; looking at it critically in all lights. Madam in the closet could have hit her for her inquisitive curiosity.

"You are right, John," she said, with an unmistakable sigh of relief as she gave the missive back, "I certainly do not recognize that handwriting. It is like no one's that I ever saw."

"It is a disguised hand, you see," he answered. "No question about that: and accomplished in the cleverest manner."

"Is it true that poor Edmund had been drawing bills in conjunction with Alexander?"

"Only one. He had drawn a good many I'm afraid during his short lifetime in conjunction with other people, but only one with Alexander—which they got renewed. No blame attaches to Alexander; not a scrap of it."

"Oliver told me that."

"Ay. I have a notion that poor Edmund did not get into this trouble for his own sake; but to help that young scamp, his brother."

"Which brother?"

"Which brother!" echoed Mr. North rather in mockery. "As if you need ask that. There's only one of them who could deserve the epithet: and that's Sidney. An awful scamp he is. He is but twenty years of age, and he is as deep in the ways of a bad world as though he were forty."

"I am very sorry to hear you say it. Whispers go abroad about him, as I daresay you know; but I would rather not have heard them confirmed by you."

"People can't say much too bad of him. We have got Mrs. North to thank for it: it is all owing to the way she has brought him up. When I would have corrected his faults, she stepped between us. Oftentimes have I thought of the enemy that sowed the tares amid the wheat in his neighbour's field."

"The old saying comes home to many of us," observed Mrs. Cumberland with a suppressed sigh, as she rose to leave. "When our children are young they tread upon our toes, but when they get older they tread upon our hearts."

"Ay, ay! Don't go yet," added Mr. North. "It is pleasant in times of sorrow to see an old friend. I have no friends now."

"I must go, John. Ellen Adair is waiting for me; she will find the time long. And I expect it would not be very agreeable to your wife to see me here. Not that I know for why; or what I can have done to her."

"She encourages nobody; nobody of the good old days," was the confidential rejoinder. "There's no fear of her; I saw her going off towards the shrubberies—after Master Sidney, I suppose. She takes what she calls her constitutional walks there. They last a couple of hours sometimes."

As Mr. North turned to put the letter into the drawer again, he saw the scrap of poetry that had been found in Arthur Bohun's desk. This he also showed his visitor. He would have kept nothing from her: she was the only link left to him of the days when he and the world (to him) were alike young. Had Mrs. Cumberland stayed there till night, he would then have thought it too soon for her to go away.

"I will do all I can for your son, Fanny," said Mr. North, as they stood for a moment at the glass doors. "I like Oliver. He is a steady, persevering fellow, and I'll help him on if I can. If I do not, the fault will not lie with me. You understand?" he added, looking at her.

Mrs. Cumberland understood perfectly: that the fault would lie with Madam. She nodded in answer.

"Mr. Alexander is going, John—as you know. Should Oliver succeed

in getting the whole of the practice—and there's nothing to prevent it—he will soon be making a large income. In that case, I suppose he will be asking you to give him something else."

"You mean Bessy. I wish to goodness he had her!" continued Mr. North impulsively: "I do heartily wish it sometimes. She has not a very happy life of it here. Well, well; I hope Oliver will get on with all my heart; tell him so from me, Fanny. He shall have her when he does."

"*Shall* he!" ejaculated Madam from her closet, and in her most scornfully defiant tone—for the conversation had not pleased her.

They went strolling away amid the parterres of flowers, Madam peering after them with angry eyes. She heard her husband tell Mrs. Cumberland to come again; to come in often, whenever she would. Mr. North went on with her down the broad path, after they had lingered some minutes with the sweet flowers. In strolling back alone, who should pounce upon Mr. North from a side path but Madam!

"Was not that woman I saw you with the Cumberland, Mr. North!"

"It was Mrs. Cumberland: my early friend. She came in to express her sympathy at my loss. I took it as very kind of her, Madam."

"I take it as very insolent," retorted Madam. "She had some girl with her when she came in. Who was it?"

"Some girl!" repeated Mr. North, whose memory was anything but retentive. "Ah yes, I remember: she said her ward was waiting for her."

"Who is her ward?"

"The daughter of a friend whom they knew in India, Madam. In India or Australia; I forget which: George Cumberland was stationed in both places. A charming young lady with a romantic name: Ellen Adair."

Madame toyed with the black lace that shielded her face. "You seem to know her, Mr. North."

"I have seen her in the road; and in coming out of church. The first time I met them was in Dallory, one day last summer, and Mrs. Cumberland told me who she was. That is all I know of her, Madam—as you seem to be curious."

"Is she living at Mrs. Cumberland's?"

"Just now she is. I—I think they said she was going to be sent out to join her father," added Mr. North, whose impressions were always hazy in matters that did not immediately concern him. "Yes, I'm nearly sure, Madam: to Australia."

"Her father—whoever he may be—is not in Europe then," slightly spoke Madam, stooping to root up mercilessly a handful of blue-bells.

"Her father lives over yonder. That's why the young lady has to go out."

Madam tossed away the rifled flowers and raised her head to its customary haughty height. The danger had passed. "Over yonder" meant, as she knew, some far-off antipodes. She flung aside the girl and the interlude from her recollections, just as ruthlessly as she had flung the blue-bells.

"I want some money, Mr. North."

Mr. North went into a flutter at once. "I—I have none by me, Madam."

"Then give me a cheque."

"Nor cheque, either. I don't happen to have a signed cheque in the house, and Richard is gone for the day."

"What have I repeatedly told you—that you must *keep* money by you; and cheques too," was her stern answer. "Why does Richard sign the cheques always?—Why can't you sign them?"

She had asked the same thing fifty times, and he had never been goaded to give the true answer.

"I have not signed a cheque since Thomas Gass died, except on my own private account, Madam; no, nor for long before it. My account is over-drawn. I shan't have a stiver in the bank until next quarter-day."

"You told me that last week," she said contemptuously. "Draw then upon the firm account."

"He shook his head. The bank would not cash it."

"Why?"

"Because only Richard can sign. Oh dear, this is going over and over the old ground again. You'll wear me out, Madam. When Richard took first acting place at the works, it was judged advisable that he should alone sign the business cheques—for convenience' sake, Madam; for convenience' sake. Gass's hands were crippled with gout; I was here with my flowers."

"I don't care who signs the cheques so that I get the money," she retorted in a rude, rough tone. "You must give me some to-day."

"It is for Sidney; I know it is for Sidney," spoke Mr. North tremulously. "Madam, you are ruining that lad. For his own sake some check must be put upon him: and therefore I am thankful that to-day I have no money to give."

He took some short hurried steps over the corners of paths and flower-beds, with the last words, and got into his own room. Madam calmly followed. Very sure might he be that she would not allow him to escape her.

Ellen Adair, waiting for Mrs. Cumberland, had *not* felt the time long. Very shortly after she was left alone, the carriage came back from the station, bringing Arthur Bohun: Richard had been left at Whitborough. Captain Bohun got out at the gates, intending to walk up to the house. Ellen saw him come limping along—the halt in his gait was always

more visible when he had been sitting for any length of time—and he at the same time caught sight of the bright hues of the lilac dress gleaming through the trees.

Some years back, the detachment commanded by Arthur Bohun was quartered in Ireland. One ill-starred night it was called out to suppress some local disturbances, and he got desperately wounded: shot, as was supposed unto death. That he would never be fit for service again: that his death, though it might be a lingering one, was inevitable; surgeons and friends alike thought. For nearly two years he was looked upon as a dying man: that is, as a man who could not possibly recover. But Time, the great healer, healed him; and he came out of his long sickness and danger with only a slight limp, more or less perceptible. When walking slowly, or when he took any one's arm, it was not seen at all. Mrs. North (who was proud of her handsome and distinguished son, although she had no love for him,) was wont to tell friends confidentially that he had a bullet in his hip yet—at which Arthur laughed.

The sight of the lilac dress caused him to turn aside. Ellen rose and stood waiting; her whole being was thrilling with the rapture the meeting brought. He took her hand in his, his face lighting.

"Is it indeed you, Ellen! I should as soon have expected to see a fairy here."

"Mrs. Cumberland has gone to call on Mr. North. She told me to wait for her."

"I have been with Dick to take my uncle and James to the station," spoke Captain Bohun, pitching upon it as something to say, for his tongue was never too fluent when alone with her. "He has been asking me to go and stay with him."

"Sir Nash has?"

"Yes. Jimmy invites nobody; he is taken up with his missionaries, and that."

"Shall you go?"

Their eyes met as she put the question. Go! away from her!

"I think not," he quietly answered. "Not at present. Miss Bohun's turn must come first: she has been writing for me this long while."

"That's your aunt."

"My aunt. And a good old soul she is. Won't you walk about a little, Ellen?"

She took the arm he held out, and they paced the covered walks, almost in silence. The May birds were singing, the budding leaves were dancing. Eloquence enough for them: and each might have detected the beating of the other's heart. Madam had her ear glued to that closet door, and so missed the sight. A sight that would have made her hair stand on end.

Minutes, for lovers, fly on swift wings. When Mrs. Cumberland ap-
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peared, it seemed that she had been away no time. Ellen went forward to meet her : and Captain Bohun said he had just come home from the station. Mrs. Cumberland, absorbed in her own cares, complaining of fatigue, took little or no notice of him : he strolled by their side up the Ham. Standing at Mrs. Cumberland's gate for a moment in parting, Oliver Rane came so hastily out of his house that he ran against them.

"Don't push me over, Rane," spoke Arthur Bohun in his lazy but very pleasing manner.

"I beg your pardon. When I am in a hurry I believe I am apt to drive on in a blindfold fashion."

"Is any one ill, Oliver?" questioned his mother.

"Yes. At Mrs. Gass's. I fear it is herself. The man who brought the message did not know."

"You ought to keep a horse," spoke Captain Bohun, as the doctor recommenced his course. "So much running about must wear out a man's legs."

"Ought I—oughts go for a great deal, don't they?" replied the doctor, looking back. "I ought to be rich enough to keep one ; but I'm not."

Captain Bohun wished them good day, and they went indoors. Ellen wondered to hear that Mrs. Cumberland was going out again. Feeling uneasy—as she said—on the score of the sudden illness, she took her way to the house of Mrs. Gass, in spite of the fatigue she had been complaining of. A long walk for her at any time. Arrived there, she found that lady in perfect health : it was one of her servants to whom Oliver had been summoned. The young woman had scalded badly her hand and arm.

"I was at the Hall this morning, and Mr. North showed me the anonymous letter," Mrs. Cumberland took occasion to say. "It evidently comes from a stranger ; a stranger to us. The handwriting is entirely strange."

"So much the better, ma'am," heartily spoke Mrs. Gass. "T'would be too bad to think it was writ by a friend."

"Oliver thinks it was Madam," pursued Mrs. Cumberland dropping her voice. "At least—he has not gone so far as to say *he* thinks it, but that Mr. Alexander does."

"That's just the word he gave to me, ma'am. Alexander thought it, he said, but that he hisself didn't know what to think, one way or the other. As well perhaps for us not to talk of it : least said is soonest mended."

"Of course. But I cannot help recalling a remark once innocently made by Arthur Bohun in my hearing : that he did not know anybody who could imitate different handwritings so well as his mother. Did you"—Mrs. Cumberland looked cautiously round—"observe the girl, Molly Green, take her handkerchief from her pocket while she stood here?"

"I didn't see her with any handkercher," was the answer, given after a pause of reflection. "Shouldn't think the girl's got one. She put her basket on the sideboard there, to come forward to my geraniums, and she stood stock still, while she looked at 'em. I don't say she didn't touch her pocket; but I never saw her at it."

"It might have been. These little actions often pass unnoticed. And it is so easy for any other article to slip up unseen when a handkerchief is drawn out of a pocket," concluded Mrs. Cumberland in a suppressed tone of almost trembling eagerness. Which Mrs. Gass noticed, and did not quite like.

But there's a little something yet to tell of Dallory Hall. When Madam followed her husband through the glass doors into his parlour, an unusually unpleasant scene ensued. For once Mr. North held out resolutely. He had no other resource, for he had not the money to give her, and did not know where to get it. That it was for Sidney, he well believed; and for that reason only would have denied it to the utmost of his poor feeble strength. Madam flounced out in one of her worst moods. Mrs. Cumberland's visit and the startling sight of Ellen Adair had brought to her unexampled annoyance. As ill-luck had it, she encountered Bessy in the hall, and upon her vented her dreadful temper. The short scene was a violent one. When it was over, the poor girl went shivering and trembling into her father's parlour. He had been standing with the door ajar, shrinking almost as much as Bessy, and utterly powerless to interfere.

"Oh child! if I could but save you from this!" he murmured, as they stood together before the window, and he fondly stroked the soft hair that lay on his breast. "It's one of the troubles that are wearing me out, Bessy; wearing me out before my time."

He burst into tears; perhaps her own sobs set him on; and they cried in concert. Bessy North was patient, meek, enduring; but meekness and patience can both be tried beyond their strength.

"Oliver Rane wants you; you know that, Bessy. If he could see his way clear to keep you, you should go to him to-morrow. Ay, though your poor brother has just been put into his grave."

Bessy lifted her head. In these moments of dire emotion, the heart speaks out without reticence.

"Papa, I would go to Oliver as he is now, and risk it," she said through her blinding tears. "I should not be afraid of our getting on: we'd make shift together, until better luck came. He spoke a word of this to me not long ago, but his lips were tied, he said, and he could not press it."

"He thought he had not enough for you."

"He thought you would not consider it so. I should, papa. And I think those who bravely set out to struggle on together, have as much happiness in their shifts and economy as others who begin with a fortune."

"We'll see; we'll see, Bessy. I'd like you to try it, if you are not afraid. I'll talk to Dick. But—mind!—not a word here," he added, glancing round at the door to indicate the precincts of Mrs. North. "We shall have to keep it to ourselves if we'd not get it frustrated. I wonder how much Oliver makes a year."

"Not much; but he is advancing slowly. He has talked to me about it. What keeps one will keep two, papa."

"He'll come into about two hundred a year when his mother dies. And I fear she won't live long, by what she tells me. Poor Fanny! Not that I'd counsel anybody to reckon on dead men's shoes, child. Life's uncertain: he might die before her."

"He would not reckon on anything but his own exertions, papa. He told me a secret—that he is engaged on a medical work, writing it all his spare time. It is quite certain to take, he says, to be popular, and bring him good returns. Oh papa, there will be no doubt of our getting on. Let us risk it!"

"What a bright, hopeful tone she spoke in—let us risk it!—her mild eyes shining, the tears dried on her cheeks. Mr. North caught the glad spirit, and resolved—Dick being willing; sensible Dick—that they should risk it.

CHAPTER IX.

IN LAWYER DALE'S OFFICE.

WHITBOROUGH was a good-sized, bustling town, sending two members to parliament. In the heart of it lived Mr. Dale, the lawyer, who did a little in money lending as well. He was a short stout man, with a red pimply face and no whiskers, nearly bald on the top of his round head; and usually attired himself in the attractive costume of a brown tail coat and white neckcloth.

On this same morning, which had witnessed the departure of Sir Nash Bohun and his son from Dallory Hall, Mr. Dale—known commonly amid his townsfolk as lawyer Dale—was seated in his office at Whitborough. It was a small room, containing a kind of double desk, at which two people might face each other. The lawyer's place at it was against the wall, his face to the room; a clerk sometimes sat, or stood, on the other side when business was pressing. Adjoining this office was one for the clerks, three of whom were kept; and clients had to come through their room to reach the lawyer's.

Mr. Dale was writing busily. The clock was on the stroke of twelve, and a great deal of the morning's work had to be done yet; when one of the clerks came in; a tall, thin cadaverous youth with black hair, parted into a flat curl on his forehead.

"Are you at home, sir?"

"Who is it?" asked Mr. Dale, growling at the interruption.

"Mr. Richard North."

"Send him in."

Richard came in: a fine looking man in his deep black clothes—the lawyer could not help thinking so. After shaking hands—a ceremony Mr. Dale liked to observe with all his clients, they being agreeable—he came from behind his desk to seat himself in his dwarf elbow-chair of red patent leather, and gave Richard a seat opposite. The room was small, the desk and other furniture large, and they sat nearly nose to nose. Richard held his hat on his knee.

"You guess no doubt what has brought me here, Mr. Dale. Now that my ill-fated brother is put out of our sight in his last resting-place, I have leisure and inclination to look into the miserable event that sent him to it. I shall spare neither cost nor energy in discovering—if so may be—the traitor."

"You allude to the anonymous letter."

"Yes. And I have come here to ask you to give me all the information you can about it."

"But, my good sir, I have no information to give. I don't possess any."

"I ought to have said information of the attendant circumstances. Let me hear your history of the transaction from beginning to end: and if you can impart to me any hint of the possible writer—that is, if you have formed any private notion of him—I trust you will do so."

Mr. Dale could be a little tricky on occasion; he was sometimes engaged in transactions that would not have borne the light, and that most certainly he would never have talked of. On the contrary, he could be honest and truthful where there existed no reason for being the contrary: and this anonymous letter business came under the latter category.

"The transaction was as open and straightforward as could be," spoke the lawyer—and Richard, a judge of character and countenances, saw he was speaking the truth. "Mr. Edmund North came to me one day some short time ago, wanting me to let him have a hundred pounds on his own security. I didn't care to do that—I knew about his bill transactions, you see—and I proposed that somebody should join him. Eventually he came with Alexander the surgeon, and the matter was arranged."

"Do you know for what purpose he wanted the money?"

"For his young brother, Sidney North. A fast young man, that, Mr. Richard," added the lawyer in a significant tone.

"Yes. Unfortunately."

"Well, he had got into some secret trouble, and came praying to Mr. Edmund to get him out of it. Whatever foolish ways Edmund North had wasted money in, there's this consolation remaining to his friends—

that the transaction which eventually sent him to his grave was one of pure kindness," added the lawyer warmly.

"My father has enough trouble, Dale," he said to me, "what with one thing and another, his life's about worried out of him; and I don't care that he should get to hear of what Master Sidney's been doing, if it can be kept from him?" Yes; the motive was a good one."

"How was it he did not apply to me?" asked Richard.

"Well—had you not, just about that time, assisted your brother Edmund in some scrape of his own?"

Richard North nodded.

"Just so. He said he had not the face to apply to you so soon again; should be ashamed of himself. Well, to go on, Mr. Richard North. I gave him the money on the bill; and when it became due, neither he nor Alexander could meet it: so I agreed to renew. Only one day after that, the anonymous letter found its way to Dallory Hall."

"You are sure of that?"

"Certain. The bill was renewed on the 30th of April; here, in this very room; Mr. North got the letter on the 1st of May."

"It was so. By the evening post."

"So that, if the transaction got wind through that renewing, the writer did not lose much time."

"Well now, Mr. Dale, in what way could that transaction have got wind, and who heard of it?"

"I never spoke of it to a single soul," impetuously cried the lawyer, giving his knee a thump with his closed hand. And Richard North felt sure that he had not.

"The transaction from the beginning was known only to us three people: Edmund North, the surgeon, and myself. I don't believe either of them mentioned it at all. I know I did not. It's just possible Edmund North might have told his step-brother Sidney the way he got the money—the young scamp. I beg your pardon, Mr. Richard; I forgot he was your brother also."

"It would be to Sidney's interest to keep it quiet," casually remarked Richard. "Our men at the works have got a report running amidst them—I know not whence picked up, and I don't think they know—that the writer of the letter was your clerk, Wilks."

"Flam!" contemptuously rejoined the lawyer. "I've heard of that. Why should Wilks trouble his head to write about it? Don't you believe anything so foolish."

"I don't believe it," returned Richard North. "The man could have no motive whatever for it, as far as I can see. But I think this—that he may have become cognisant of the affair, and talked of it abroad."

"Not one of my clerks knew anything about it," protested Mr. Dale.

"I've got three of 'em : Wilks and two others. You don't suppose, sir, I take them into my confidence in all things."

"But, is it quite impossible that any one of them—say Wilks—could have got to know of it surreptitiously?" urged Richard.

"Wilks has nothing surreptitious about him," said the lawyer. "He is too shallow-pated. A thoroughly useful clerk here, but a man without guile."

"I did not mean to apply the word surreptitious to him personally. I'll change it if you like. Could Wilks, or either of the other two have accidentally learnt this, without your knowledge? Was there a possibility of it? Come, Mr. Dale; be open with me. Even if it were so, no blame attaches to you."

"It is just this," answered Mr. Dale, accepting the solicitation to be open—"that I don't see how it was possible for any one of them to have learnt it; while at the same time, I see no other way in which it could have transpired. That's the candid truth."

"But—is it quite impossible they could have learnt it?" urged Richard North, repeating his words.

"It seems impossible to me; but it is just one of those things that one could not take a Bible oath to. I lay awake in the night for half-an-hour, turning the puzzle about in my mind. Alexander says he never opened his lips upon it; I know I did not; and poor Edmund North went into his fatal passion thinking Alexander wrote the letter, because he said Alexander alone knew of it; which is a pretty sure proof he had not talked himself."

"Which brings us back again to your clerks," remarked Richard North. "They might have overheard a few chance words when the bill was renewed."

"I'm sure the door was shut," debated Mr. Dale, in a tone as if he were *not* sure, but rather sought to tell himself he was sure. "Only Wilks was in that morning; the other two had gone out."

"Rely upon it, that's how it happened, then. The door could not have been quite closed."

"Well, I don't know. I generally shut it myself, with a bang too, when important clients are in here. I confess," honestly added Mr. Dale, "that it's the only loop-hole I can see. If the door was unlatched, Wilks might have heard. I had him in last night, and taxed him with it. He denies it out and out: says that, even if the affair had reached his knowledge, he knows his duty better than to have talked of it."

"I don't doubt that he does, when in his sober senses. But he is not always in them."

"Oh, come, Mr. Richard North, it is not so bad as that." Richard was silent. If Mr. Dale was satisfied with his clerk and his clerk's discretion, he had no wish to render him otherwise.

"He takes too much now and then, you know, Mr. Dale; and he

may have dropped a word in some enemy's hearing; who caught it up and then wrote the letter. Would you mind my questioning him?"

"He is not here to be questioned, or you might do it and welcome," replied Mr. Dale. "Wilks is lying up to-day. He has not been well for more than a week past; could hardly do his work yesterday."

"I'll take an opportunity of seeing him, then," said Richard. "My father won't rest until the writer of this letter shall be traced; neither, in truth, shall I."

The lawyer said good morning to his visitor, and returned to his desk. But ere he recommenced work, he thought over the chief subject of their conversation. Had the traitor been Wilks, he asked himself? What Richard North had said was perfectly true—that the young man sometimes took too much after work was over. But Mr. Dale had hitherto found no cause to complain of his discretion: and, difficult as any other loop-hole of suspicion seemed, he finally concluded that he had no cause now.

Meanwhile Richard North walked back to Dallory—it was nearly two miles from Whitborough. Passing his works, he continued his way a little further, to a turning called North Inlet; in which were some houses large and small tenanted chiefly by his work-people. In one of these, a pretty cottage standing back, lodged Timothy Wilks. The landlady was a relative of Wilks's, and as he got his two rooms cheap, he did not mind the walk twice a day to and from Whitborough.

"Good morning, Mrs. Green. Is Timothy Wilks in?"

Mrs. Green, an ancient matron in a mob-cap, was on her hands and knees, whitening the door-step. She got up at the salutation, saw it was Richard North, and curtsied.

"Tim have just crawled out to get a bite o' sunshine, sir. He's very bad to-day. Would you please to walk in, Mr. Richard?"

Here, amidst this colony of his work-people, he was chiefly known as "Mr. Richard." Mrs. Green's husband was time-keeper at the North works.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Richard, as he stepped over the threshold and the bucket to the little parlour.

"Well, sir, I only hope it's not the low-fever; but it looks to me uncommon like it."

"Since when has he been ill?"

"He have been ailing this fortnight past. The fact is, sir, he *won't* keep steady," she added in a deploring tone. "Once a week he's safe to come home the worse for drink, and that's pay night; and sometimes it's oftener than that. Then for two days afterwards he can't eat; and so it goes on, and he gets as weak as a rat. It's not that he takes much drink; it is that a little upsets him. Some men could take half-a-dozen glasses a'most to his one."

"What a pity it is!" exclaimed Richard.

"He had a regular bout of it a week ago," resumed Mrs. Green; who when she was set off on the score of Timothy's misdoings, never knew when to stop. It was so well known to North Inlet, this failing of the young man's, that she might have talked of it in the market-place and not betrayed confidence. "He had been ailing before, as I said, Mr. Richard; off his food, and that; but one night he caught it smartly, and he's been getting ill ever since."

"Caught what smartly?" asked Richard, not understanding North Inlet idioms.

"Why, the drink, sir. He came home reeling, and give his head such a bang again the door-post that it knocked him back'ards. I got him up somehow—Green was out—and on to his bed, and there he went off in a dead faint. I'd no vinegar in the house: if you want a thing in a hurry you're sure to be out of it: so I burnt a feather up his nose and that brought him to. He began to talk all sorts of nonsense then, about doing 'bills' whatever that might mean, and old Dale's money boxes, running words into one another like mad, so that you couldn't make top nor tail o' the sense. I'd never seen him as bad as this, and got a'most frightened."

She paused to take breath, always short with Mrs. Green. The words, "doing bills" struck Richard North. He immediately perceived that hence might have arisen the report (for she had no doubt talked of this publicly) that Timothy Wilks was the traitor. Other listeners could put two and two together as well as he.

"I thought I'd get in the vinegar, in case he went off again," resumed Mrs. Green, having laid in a fresh stock of breath. "And when I was running round to the shop for it—leastways walking, for I can't run now—who should I meet, turning out of Ketler's but Dr. Rane. I stopped to tell him, and he said he'd look in and see Tim. He's a kind man in sickness, Mr. Richard."

"Did he come?" asked Richard.

"Right off, sir, there and then. When I got back he had put cloths of cold water on Tim's head. And wasn't Tim talking! You might have thought him a show-man at the fair. The doctor wrote something on paper with his pencil and sent me off again to Stevens's the druggist's, and Stevens he gave me a little bottle of white stuff to bring back. The doctor gave Tim some of it in a tea-cup of cold water, and it sent him into a good sleep. But he has never been well, sir, since then: and now I misdoubt me but it will end in low fever."

"Do you remember what night this was?" asked Richard.

"Ay, that I do, sir. For the foolish girls was standing out by twos and threes, making bargains with their sweethearts to go a maying at morning dawn. I told 'em they'd a deal better stop in-doors to mend their stockings. 'Twas the night afore the First of May, Mr. Richard."

"The evening of the day the bill was renewed," thought Richard.

He possessed the right clue now. If he had entertained any doubt of Wilks before, this set it at rest.

"Did any of the neighbours hear Tim talking?" he asked.

"Not a soul but me and Dr. Rane here, sir. But I b'lieve he had been holding forth to a room full at the Wheatsheaf. They say he was part gone when he got there. Oh, it does make me so vexed, the ranting way he goes on when the drink's in him. If his poor father and mother could look up from their graves, they'd be fit to shake him in very shame. Drink is the worst curse that's going, Mr. Richard—and poor Tim's weak head won't stand hardly a drop of it."

She had told all she knew. Richard North stepped over the bucket again, remarking that he might meet Tim. Sure enough he did. In taking a cross-cut to the works, he came upon him, leaning against the wooden rails that bordered a piece of waste land. He looked very ill: Richard saw that: a small, slight young man with a mild pleasant countenance and inoffensive manners. His mother had been a cousin of Mrs. Green's, but superior to the Greens in station. Timothy would have held his head considerably above North Inlet, but for being brought down both in consequence and pocket by these oft-recurring bouts.

Kindly and courteously, but with a tone of resolution not to be mistaken, Richard North entered on his questioning. He did not suspect Wilks of having written the anonymous letter; he told him this candidly; but he suspected, nay, knew, that it must have been penned by some one who had gathered certain details from Wilks's tongue. Wilks, weak and ill, acknowledged that the circumstance of the drawing of the bill (or rather the renewing of one) had penetrated to his hearing in Mr. Dale's office; but he declared that he had not, so far as he knew, repeated it again.

"I'd no more talk of our office business, sir, than I'd write an anonymous letter," said he, much aggrieved. "Mr. Dale never had a more faithful clerk about him than I am."

"I dare say you would not, knowingly," was Richard's rejoinder. "Answer me one question, Wilks. Have you any recollection of haranguing the public at the Wheatsheaf?"

Mr. Wilks's answer to this was, that he had not harangued the public at the Wheatsheaf. He remembered being at the house quite well, and there had been a good deal of argument in the parlour, chiefly, he thought, touching the question of whether masters in general ought not to give holiday on the First of May. There had been no particular haranguing on his part, he declared; and he could take his oath that he never opened his lips there about what had come to his knowledge. One thing he did confess, on being pressed by Richard—that he had no remembrance of quitting the Wheatsheaf, or of how he got home. He retained a faint notion of having seen Dr. Rane's face bending over him, but could not say whether it was a dream or reality.

Nothing more could be got out of Timothy Wilks. That the man was guiltless of intentional treachery there was as little doubt of as that the treachery had occurred through his tongue. Richard North bent his steps to the Wheatsheaf, to hold conference with Packerton, the landlord of that much-frequented hostelry.

And any information that Packerton could give, he was willing to give: but it amounted to little. Richard wanted to get at the names of all who went into the parlour on the night of the 30th of April, during the time that Wilks was there. The landlord told over as many as he could remember; but said that others might have gone in and out. One man (who looked like a gentleman and sat by Wilks) was a stranger, he said; he had never seen him before or since. This man got quite friendly with Wilks, and went out with him, propping up his steps. Packerton's son, a smart young fellow of thirteen, going out on an errand, had overtaken them on their way across the waste ground. (In the very path where Richard had but now encountered Wilks.) Wilks was holding on by the railings, the boy said, talking with the other as fast as he could talk, and the other was laughing. Richard North wished he could find out who this man was, and where he might be seen: for, of all the rest mentioned by the landlord, there was not one at all likely to have taken up the cause and written the anonymous letter. Packerton's opinion was, that Wilks had not spoken of the matter there; he was then hardly "far enough gone" to have committed the imprudence.

"But I suppose he was when he left you," said Richard.

"Yes, sir, I'm afraid he might have been. He could talk; but every bit of reason had gone out of him. I never saw anybody but Wilks just like this when they've taken too much."

Again Richard North sought Wilks, and questioned him who this stranger, man or gentleman, was. He might as well have questioned the moon. Wilks had a hazy impression of having been with a tall, thin, strange man; but where or when or how, he knew not.

"I'll ask Rane what sort of a condition Wilks was in when he saw him," thought Richard.

But Richard could not carry out his intentions until night. Business claimed him for the rest of the day, and then he went home to dinner.

Dr. Rane was in his dining-room that night, the white blind drawn before the window, and writing by the light of a shaded candle. Bessy North had said to her father that Oliver was busy with a medical work that he expected good returns from, when published. It was so. He spared no labour; over that, or anything else; often writing far into the little hours. He was a patient, persevering man: once give him a fair chance of success, a good start on life's road, and he would be sure to go on to fortune. He said this to himself continually; and he was not mistaken. But the good chance had not come yet.

The clock was striking eight, when the doctor heard a ring at his door bell, and Phillis appeared, showing in Richard North. A thrill passed through Oliver Rane: perhaps he could not have told why or wherefore.

Richard sat down, and began to talk about Wilks, asking what he had to ask, entering into the question generally. Dr. Rane listened in silence.

"I beg your pardon," he suddenly said, remembering his one shaded candle. "I ought to have got more light."

"It's quite light enough for me," replied Richard. "Don't trouble. I'd as soon talk by this light as by a better. To go back to Wilks: Did he say anything about the bill in your hearing, Rane?"

"Not a word; not a syllable. Or, if he did, I failed to catch it."

"Old Mother Green says he talked of 'bills,'" said Richard. "That was before you saw him."

"Does she?" carelessly remarked the doctor. "I heard nothing of the kind. There was no coherence whatever in his words, so far as I noticed: one does not pay much attention to the babblings of a drunken man."

"Was he quite beside himself?—quite unconscious of what he said, Rane?"

"Well, I am told that it is the peculiar idiosyncrasy of Wilks to be able to talk and yet to *be* unconscious: unconscious for all practical purposes, and for recollection afterwards. Otherwise I should not have considered him quite so far gone as that. He talked certainly; a little; seemed to answer me in a mechanical kind of way when I asked him a question, slipping one word into another. If I tried to understand him, I don't suppose I could. He did not say much; and I was about the house looking for water and rags to put on his head."

"Then *you* heard nothing of it, Rane."

"Absolutely nothing."

The doctor sat, so that the green shade of the candle happened to fall on his face, making it look very pale. Richard North, absorbed in thoughts about Wilks, could not have told whether the face was in the dark or the light. He spoke next about the stranger who had joined Wilks, saying he wished he could find out who it was.

"A tall thin man, bearing the appearance of a gentleman?" returned Dr. Rane. "Then I think I saw him, and spoke to him."

"Where?" asked Richard with animation.

"Close by your works. He was looking in through the iron gates. After quitting Green's cottage, I crossed the waste ground, and saw him standing at the gates, underneath the centre gas-lamp. I had to visit a patient down by the church, and took the near way over the waste ground."

"You did not recognize him?"

"Not at all. He was a stranger to me. As I was passing, he turned round and asked me whether he was going right for Whitborough. I pointed to the high road and told him to keep straight along it. Depend upon it, this was the same man."

"What could he have been looking in at our gates for?" muttered Richard. "And what—for this is of more consequence—had he been getting out of Wicks?"

"It seems rather curious altogether," remarked Dr. Rane.

"I'll find this man," said Richard, as he got up to say good night; "I must find him. Thank you, Rane."

But, after his departure Oliver Rane did not settle to his work as before. A man, once interrupted, cannot always do so. All he did was to pace the room restlessly with bowed head, like a man in some uneasy dream. The candle burnt lower, the flame got above the shade, throwing its light on his face, showing up its hues and lines and angles. But it was not a bit brighter than when the green shade had cast over it its cadaverous hue.

"Edmund North! Edmund North!"

Did the words in all their piteous hopeless appeal come from him? Or was it some supernatural cry in the air?

(To be continued.)

AFTER TEN YEARS.

A DESOLATE night, with never a star,
Black clouds scudding athwart the sky,
One lurid gleam from the tower afar—
The sea-gulls moaning a piteous cry.
'Tis little changed—aye, the same old town:
The fishers' huts on the sandy beach—
The rambling streets with their houses brown,
O'erlooking the sea, and the breakers' speck.
Ten long years, and I stand here again,
Just where we parted so long ago—
Ten long years of sorrow and pain,
Torturing fear and maddening woe:
Days of heaviness—nights of unrest—
Moments that glided but drearily,
They put my soul to a terrible test,
When they tore my darling away from me!

I've wandered the wide world up and down,
Dwelt in far cities, and sailed over seas—
Gone are those visions of boyish renown,
Ambition, and love, and dreamful ease.
What ghost of the past has led me back
To these shores again?—what troubled wraith?
Too well I divine what my life doth lack—
God pity the heart that longs for death!

Here, through the chill of the pitiless night,
With the salt mists playing about my face,
I steal, like a convict, afraid of the light—
Why should I shrink, like a coward base?
This was my crime—I was poor and unknown
“No fitting lover for such as she,”
They sneeringly said—’twas this alone—
And sought to poison her heart to me.

We parted at last—’twas a bitter day—
Lips!—can I trust ye to utter her name?—
I sailed, broken-hearted, adown the bay—
Well, the world has never looked just the same.
I have grown bitter, and silent, and cold,
I who was heartsome, and merry, and gay;
As like to the fanciful boy of old,
As the black night is to the golden day!

Dear heart, but yours was the bitterer fate!
Your sad eyes haunted me night and day—
What can a woman but grieve and wait,
And weep her sorrowful life away?
Oh, you watched through sunshine and watched thro’ rain;
Oh, you waited so long alone with the past:
No wonder the moments, so heavy with pain,
Have rifled your heart of its life at last!

I’ve been roaming since in far, strange lands,
Where the tropical sun shines fiercely hot;
I’ve tarried briefly on golden strands,
Seeking forgetfulness, finding it not.
Midnight and darkness—I wait here alone,
By the fishers’ huts on the sandy shore;
No sound save the sea-bird’s wailing moan,
With the winds’ and wild waves’ thunderous roar—
And the lost hope, deadened for ever more.

E. M. C.

SOCIAL SHAMS.

WHAT is society coming to? Where is it to end? Comparing the present state of things with what obtained (say) twenty-five years ago, those who give themselves time to think of anything cannot help asking it.

This is called—to use a phrase borrowed from the Americans, but nevertheless an expensive phrase—a go-ahead age. It is something worse: an artificial one. People are artificial; manners are artificial; things themselves are artificial. There is little sincerity anywhere. A go-ahead age may have its pleasures, no doubt: but there is such a thing as going too far, and letting the head topple over. Simplicity has been lost in show; reality in sham.

Never a worse sham existed in the world or out of it, in modern times or ancient, than the manners and habits of the present middle-class society. And it is to them this paper is especially addressed. It does not concern the upper-class—that fortunate “ten thousand” we ought to admire from a distance and envy if so inclined, but certainly not ape; it most assuredly cannot concern the lower. Kings and queens, dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies, have a right to dress, and dance, and spend, and pass their days in splendour. They were born to it: they do no more than they have ever done.

But what is to be said of the class below, who seek to imitate them? If they (these middle-classes) knew how ridiculous they make themselves appear in the eyes of their betters, they might perhaps draw in. And if you wish to ask who are meant by these middle-classes, the list is a comprehensive one, and comprises many degrees. Gentle-people of tolerably large and of small incomes; our great commercial world—the people in nearly all grades of trade, high and low, for wealthy shop-keepers are now as grand at home as a banker used to be; authors, artists, parsons, lawyers, doctors, engineers, government clerks—we might go on without end; the thousands and thousands and thousands of that teeming mass, that stand mid-way between the real aristocracy and the small tradesman. It is this class, this, who have come out from their proper and natural sphere to strive for greatness with the real great.

Not content to be as our fathers were, we middle people must forsooth lift our perky heads aloft and shoot up into society's air, trying to find a footing with the ranks above. *We shall never do it.* And it would be far better to make the best of a bad job of folly, and come down again with good grace. Is it sin, as well as folly? Some of us may think so.

Look at our dinners. Invitations are sent out some two, or three, or four weeks beforehand. Mr. and Mrs. Goose are contemplating a dinner and would bid their friends to it. From twelve to twice twelve of them, in number, as the table may accommodate. Poor Mr. and Mrs. Goose are well-intentioned, quiet-natured people; but when they go out to their friends' houses they meet with all kinds of gorgeous ceremony, and are not strong-minded enough to offer only a reasonable entertainment in return. The dinner must be in the fashion—*à la Russe*. The modest establishment of Mr. and Mrs. Goose consists of only maid servants; or, at the best, one male, footman or page as the case may be. So the hired waiters, tall men and formidable, a small crowd of them, arrive on duty. Eight o'clock is the sitting-down hour (for is it not that of the very upper world, from her Majesty downwards?), and the guests are there. Nothing on the table but flowers and glass and plate—all glittering in their own brightness, and one of them at least lovely,—unless it be a great centre block of ice, that glitters also. Two soups; two dishes (often more) of fish; four entrées; boiled meats; poultry; roast meats; game; sweets—ten dishes of them at the least; cheese in some shape; ice and ice-creams; dessert. Of wines—sherry, hock, champagne, port, burgundy, claret.

At ten o'clock, or so, the dinner is over, and the ladies go to the drawing-room. Coffee comes in; tea; the gentlemen close upon it: close upon that, the carriages are announced; and the entertainment is over. Mr. and Mrs. Goose look round when left alone, and wonder, borrowing a phrase from the French, whether *le jeu* has been worth *la chandelle*.

Is this, or is this not, a true picture of a modern dinner party, in this our year, 1870? I think you will say that it is. And what more of a display could you expect if you went out to a dinner at the house of the premier duke of England? Nay—with all respect be it spoken—at Windsor Castle? There might be a few additional dishes and attendants, the plate might be real, the service silver-gilt or gold: but for the style of entertainment, the two are the same. The next question that naturally suggests itself is—Is this dinner for us inferior classes a seemly one?

Seemly as regards common sense; reason; religion? Let our hearts and consciences answer it. Take common sense: Mr. and Mrs. Goose—but particularly Mrs. Goose—have been upset for nearly a week beforehand, choosing the dishes and making arrangements for the grand event. The servants have been upset, the cook has been driven wild. Or, it may be that Mr. and Mrs. Goose go a rather less troublesome and more expensive way to work, and give a confectioner *carte-blanche* to supply all.—A way that is sometimes productive of consternation instead of satisfaction. A friend of mine invited his guests and the dinner never arrived. It had come to the wrong house. But let

all that pass.—Mr. Goose knows that if he can afford it he ought not: he knows also that there has been a frightful waste of money and provisions; he knows that no satisfaction has come of it—save the poor one of his neighbours saying The Gooses have had a dinner-party.

Take reason. Is there any in gathering a number of guests together, strangers for the most part to each other, sitting down to table the moment the last has arrived, and all eating, eating, eating, until they go away again? Can you, a guest, call it a visit?—can you call it only an hour or two's friendly intercourse with old acquaintance? No: for you happen to have been placed at dinner between two people whom you never saw before, and perhaps never may see again; and with your host and hostess you have but exchanged How d'y'e do, and good-bye. There has been no pleasant interchange of thought, or of old associations, or of future interests: you have just been stuck at the table all the while, exchanging with your two neighbours a few common-place, heartless sentences, and eating and drinking enough for a week: in short, been neither better nor worse off than you would have been at a public subscription dinner at the London Tavern. Reason in this? I am unable to see where it lies.

To go on to religion. What has religion to do with dinner parties, you may ask? Indeed, not much. But those who take, or strive to take, the Bible for their guide, know that every individual action of life is performed for good or for ill; and when the day's course is run, ask themselves, each evening as it comes round, Has this been a day gained or lost?—Have I done in it what will tell for me at the Great Reckoning? Often when seated at one of these dinners, has it crossed my mind to wonder, whether the strange profusion, the unnecessary display, the senseless cost and waste, may not be a crying sin in the sight of God.

The worst of it is, people say there's no remedy for it. Society has drifted into this folly, and the way out of it seems cruelly narrow. Mr. and Mrs. Goose hate and abhor it with all their plain hearts; five thousand Mr. and Mrs. Gooses are hating it now all over London. "If we go out to these dinners, we must give the same kind of thing in return," say they: "and if we don't go to them we must live like hermits, for no body gives dinners less elaborate now." It is very true. The trammels of costly modern ways are about us, and we think we cannot shake them off. In one of Anthony Trollope's later works a London lawyer asks a country lawyer to dine with him. "Come and take pot-luck," says he; "I can't give you a modern dinner,"—or words to that effect. The pot-luck consisted, as Mr. Trollope tells us, of soup; and fish, and boiled fowls, and roast beef. As a matter of certainty there would be a course of sweets besides. From a quarter to half a century ago, the lawyer's pot-luck would have consisted of the roast beef, with a dish of fish added in honour of his guest and a fruit-

pie. If the modern pot-luck be what Mr. Trollope's lawyer was pleased to say it is, little marvel that the great dinners go in for their fifteen courses and dessert. But it is not. The lawyer knew, when he spoke, that it is not. As a rule, even a successful lawyer does not sit down ordinarily in the privacy of his own home, to soup and fish and fowl and meat : and the suggestion of course comes to us that he called it pot-luck by way of excuse or apology for not giving a more elaborate dinner. We cannot blame him, for we do the same. What is the world coming to ?

The extreme folly of all this consists—not in the dinners themselves ; they are charming (going back now to the grand entertainments of society), but in our attempting them ; we of the middle classes. Though it is scarcely necessary to say this : every sensible person must understand it. We have no right to do so. That which is consistent and proper in a nobleman's mansion with his twenty or thirty servants and all his wealth around him, or for a rich millionaire, is wrong and ridiculous for us. We work in some way, the greater portion of us, to gain a living ; we live in a moderate dwelling with three or four servants : and yet forsooth we must ape the customs of positive royalty !

What comes of it ? A great deal that is most unsatisfactory in many ways. Mr. and Mrs. Goose have a tolerably large circle of acquaintance, and one dinner-party does not do ; there must be others. The cost is (considering that it applies to dinner-giving and nothing else) very great ; but Mr. Goose's balance at his banker's is a fair one, and he draws the cheques. In the long run, this impoverishes his account, and his sons and daughters suffer. The sons cannot get a good start in life, or marry ; the daughters are left on hand. For, see you not, the young men and women of the present day are brought up to dinner-giving (letting alone other fashionable ways), as a requisite in life, and they know that various costs accompany it. There must be full dress ; satins, laces, feathers, jewels, gloves ; there must be carriages to go to and fro in : one expense involves another. And what do you gain ?—what do you gain ? Three hours of eating and drinking with strangers, in a room glaring with heat and gas.

Oh for the good old days when friends met friends simply and naturally ! When we were not afraid to ask people to dine with us in a plain way (but we did not think it so very plain then), leaving grand dinners with all their cost and fuss to such fête times as weddings and christenings. They were satisfied and we were satisfied, and we drew round the fire in a circle to take dessert, and talked together of old times and new ; and stored up the re-union in memory, to be thought of as one of the pleasant interludes of life ! We dare not invite people in this plain way now. "I wish I might ask you to dine with us in a quiet, friendly way, literally without ceremony, but we cannot venture upon grand dinners," said some one to me a few weeks ago. "There

is no other way I like so much," was my answer, spoken in all earnest truth. But the invitation has never come: and I know the reason is, that the contrast with the grand dinners would be so great, they do not like to give it.

Virtually it puts a vast many people out of society, this loud system of dinner-giving. That word "loud" may not be a nice one to use in the sense, but I heard it so applied one day, and thought it as expressive as the other phrase—go-ahead. Unless the staff of home servants be comprehensive, and the pocket ample, it brings a world of trouble as its advance guard, of vexation of spirit in its wake. It cannot be otherwise. Those who have these servants and well filled coffers, can do as they please. For many people the giving of *one* of these dinners is enough; they shrink in dread from venturing on a second. It puts them, I say, virtually out of society, for they do not like to go out if they make no return.

And the tea-drinking of the old days, where is it? Gone. And much pleasant happiness with it. "Will you come and drink tea with me?" had used to be a very frequent request. And, to go without ceremony and gather round the tea-table, was delightful to men as well as women. Fancy our venturing to ask a small party of grown-up men and women to come to a tea-party now!

Dinners—these dinners—form but a unit in the follies of modern society. There are others; but they cannot be entered on in this paper. Whence come the bankruptcies and the frauds that of late have been so rife? A great many of them from the embarrassment entailed by this high-pressure living. Sons and daughters go in for all kinds of expense and folly and greatness: they dance and dress, and hunt, and mince their words in affectation, imitating, as they think, their betters: they must ride in the Row, and drive in the Park, entrenching on the ground once kept for the sons and daughters of the nobles of the land.

People are not contented to be as their fathers were: they must soar higher. This feeling pervades every class of society from the very remotest. The worst is, it does not take its rise in honest legitimate ambition, the striving to get on by patient degrees, but in the wish to be fine and grand. The daughters of small shop-keepers could not for the world seek situations in their own sphere; they make themselves into governesses: the sons aim at wholesale business and professions. If the father amass money, his girls go in for being "ladies," his boys for barristers, engineers, authors, the civil service examination,—anything but trade. Here we go up, up, up, sings everybody. And it often results in having to wail, Here we go down, down, down.

One of the most senseless follies of these modern times is the late hour that society observes for its evening parties; almost turning night into day. If our card of invitation says eight o'clock—and that's the earliest now-a-days—we, to be in the mode, must go at nine, or later.

If the card says nine, as most cards do say, the first instalment of the company arrives at ten, the last at midnight. All very well, this, for our betters, those favoured few who have nothing to do with their time and can lie in bed all the next day if they like: but what of us? Of us, who have offices and counting-houses needing our presence betimes, or clients or patients waiting, or work to do? Who have, in short, our livings to get, and the daily occupations that cannot do without us? To go out to these evening gatherings, with their crowding and heat and excitement, at the hour we ought (literally) to be retiring to rest, unfits us for work next day. Why do we do it?—Why submit to it? Because we can't help ourselves. It is the fashion, and we are carried away by the stream.

There *is* no help for it. As Mr. and Mrs. Goose would tell you. They would willingly alter it, but they don't know how. If they sent out cards for an evening party for seven o'clock precisely, requesting their friends to be punctual to the hour, people would think a revolution had set in. So they drift onwards with the stream of other men and women, keenly conscious at odd moments that it is not quite the thing for those to do who are drifting so rapidly down the stream of life.

The curious part of all this is, that it is an utter sham. Nobody likes to go out at these late hours—with the exception of a few fast young men who are doing their best to ruin themselves in more ways than one. Men, for the most part, *resent* these late parties; while dressing for them they grumble fiercely, avowing that they'd rather go to bed and get their full night's rest: as a great many do, flatly refusing to go at all. It is a false, heartless, undesirable state of things. And yet we follow it: follow it in very helplessness: and on the morrow after one of these sittings-up, Mr. Goose and the young Messrs. Goose go off late to their day's occupation with sleepy eyes, and heads not too fit for business.

Every extreme has its reaction; exaggeration recoils upon itself. Already there are signs that this condition of things will have a change. It was the absurd and sinful luxury the upper classes of the French nation drifted into, that brought about the French revolution. Whence came our tea-dinners, now growing so popular? Whence arises the scarcity of men at evening-parties? The great cost and trouble of modern dinners in the one case; the late hours in the other. It would be almost too good to hope that we shall go back to simplicity in manners and habits; but when the real reaction comes, folly will not be spared. Not the primitive simplicity of our forefathers: that will never be: but the genuine single-mindedness that comes of honest hearts, daring to be true to themselves and to the world. If we, England's middle classes, so comprehensive in our different degrees, so vast in our numbers, would but wash our hands of the heartless follies we have somehow fallen into, and be content with our natural and proper

sphere, leaving our betters to theirs, we should be all the happier in the long run.

Oh let us! Let us abandon this miserable, false artificialism!—and take up again with the good wholesome sincerity that will stand us in the time of need. When the days shall come—as they must come—that the silver cord is loosed, the golden bowl broken, we shall want to look back on a life of earnestness, not on one of acted hypocrisy.



WINTER THOUGHTS.

THE wild hedge-rose is dead, the crimson berry

Reddens amid the woods,

In coppice brown, no happy bird makes merry

The dreary solitudes.

From summer homes have fled the nestlings tender,

Beneath the cottage leaves,

And morn and eve, sweeter their song shall render

No more, from out the leaves.

The orchard fruits are pluck'd, the smooth cheeked peaches

That blushed upon the wall,

Each blossom as it droops and withers, teaches

Its lesson in its fall.

Lightens no more the sunset's amber glory

The green hill tops with gold,

Wild vapours wreathe at eve the mountains hoary,

Gray mists the stars enfold.

In happy homes, above the smiling faces,

The scarlet holly glows,

The leafy garlands, with its white flower graces,

The small pale winter rose.

Coldly upon the moorlands wide and dreary,

Glitters the hoarfrost white,

Oh, heart! like those gray moorlands waste and weary,

And wrapt in mists of night;

Glimmers the frost in all its silent whiteness,

Slumbers the seed below,

Behind the cloud is hid the starry brightness—

The flower beneath the snow.

J. I. L.

LOST IN THE POST.

MANY a true tale has been told of the disappearance of money in passing through the post. Sometimes the loss is never cleared up, but remains a mystery to the end. One of these things happened to us, and the circumstances were so curious that they would have puzzled a bench of Judges. It was a regular mystery, and could not be accounted for in any way.

"And if you don't come back to-night, you had better send me a five-pound note in a letter," said Mrs. Todhetley.

"All right," replied the squire.

This was said on the platform of Timberdale station. Tod, I, and the Squire were going to Worcester. It was a fine morning in April; and Mrs. Todhetley and Hugh had come to see us into the train for the sake of the walk. Our returning at night, or not, was left an open question, contingent upon the Squire's business being over.

"Bring me a whip, and a new bird-cage for my thrush, and a pot of marmalade, papa," called out Hugh.

"What else would you like, sir?" retorted the Squire.

"You bring 'em, Joe."

"I dare say!" said Tod.

The train puffed off, drowning Hugh's further commands. We saw him throw his cap at the train, and Mrs. Todhetley holding him back from running after it.

"That young gentleman wants to be packed off to school," remarked the Squire. "I'm afraid you two make him worse than he would be."

We reached Worcester about twelve, and went to the Star and Garter. The Squire had no end of matters on hand that day: but the two chief things that had brought him to Worcester were—to draw some money at the bank, and to negotiate with Mr. Prothero, a corn-dealer, for the sale of a load of wheat. Mr. Prothero was a close man to deal with: he wanted the wheat at one price, the Squire said it should only go at another: if he held out, the Squire meant to hold out, even though it involved the staying of the night at Worcester.

It was Wednesday; market day. Not such a large market as the Saturday's, but the town looked pretty full. The first thing the Squire did was to go to the Old Bank. At the door he turned round and said there was no need for three of us to crowd the place. However, we were then inside, and so went on.

He had something particular to say to Mr. Isaac, and asked for him. They were talking together in private at the end for a minute or

two, and then the Squire pulled out his cheque for fifty pounds, and laid it on the counter.

"How will you take it?" asked Mr. Isaac.

"In five-pound notes."

Mr. Isaac brought the money himself. The Squire put it in his pocket-book, and said good morning, and we departed. There were shops to call at and people to see: and of course the market to walk through. You'd not get the Squire to keep himself out of the market-house, if in Worcester on market-day: he'd go asking the price of the butter and fowls like any old woman. A little after four o'clock we got back to the Star; and found Mr. Prothero had not made his appearance.

"Just like him!" cried the Squire. "His appointment was for four o'clock sharp. He means to hold out against my price; that's what he thinks to do. Let him! he'll not get the wheat at less."

"I'd see him a jolly long way before he should have it at all," said haughty Tod. "Do you hear, sir?"

"Hold your tongue, Joe," was the Squire's answer.

"Any way, sir, Prothero gives you more trouble than all the rest of the buyers put together. He's a stingy, close-fisted fellow."

"But his money's safe and sure. Prothero is a respectable man, Joe; his word's as good as his bond."

Half-past four, and no Prothero. The Squire began to fume a little: if he hated one thing more than another, it was to be kept waiting.

"Look here, boys; I'll send that note to your mother," he said, taking out his pocket-book. "There's not much chance of our going back home to-night at this rate. Ring, one of you, for some paper and envelopes."

Separating one of the notes from the roll Mr. Isaac had given him, he gave it to me to put up. I asked him if I should take down the number.

"I don't think it matters, Johnny."

But I took it down, perhaps through some unconscious instinct—for I don't suppose I am more cautious than other people. In my pocket was a letter from Anna Whitney: and I pencilled on it the number of the note.

"Write inside the envelope 'Not home till to-morrow,'" growled the Squire, forgetting that it could not be there till the morning. But he was in an ill-humour.

I wrote it at his bidding: enclosed the bank-note and addressed the letter to Mrs. Todhetley at Crabb Cot. Tod and I went out to post it, and began laying plans of how we should spend the evening at Worcester.

The post office is not far from the Star, as everybody knows: and though we met a fellow who used to go to school with us, a doctor's

son, and stayed talking with him, not ten minutes elapsed before we were back again. And behold in that short while there was a change in the programme. Old Prothero had been in, the bargain about the wheat was concluded, and the Squire intended to start for home as soon as dinner was over. Tod resented the change.

"Johnny and I were going to that advertised séance—or whatever they call the thing—on electro-biology, sir. It will be first-rate fun, they say."

"Very sorry for you and Johnny. You'll have to go home instead. Prothero has bought the wheat : and that's all I should have had to stay here for."

"At his own price !" cried Tod, rather mockingly.

"No, Mr. Joe ; at mine."

"Well, it's an awful sell for us," grumbled Tod. "It's not so often we get a night at Worcester, that we should be done out of this chance."

"The fact is, I don't feel well," said the Squire, "and should most likely have gone home, whether Prothero had come in or not. I'm afraid I've caught cold, Joe."

There was not any more to be said. The Squire's colds were no joke : once he caught one, he'd be downright ill ; laid up for days. We went back by rail to Timberdale, and took a fly home.

The next morning he did not get up. Sure enough he had a cold, and was very feverish. At breakfast Mrs. Todhetley said one of us should go over to South Crabb and ask Mr. Cole to call and see him.

"Why, he hates doctors !" exclaimed Tod.

"I know he does," she answered. "But I feel sure that if he would only take his colds in time, they would not be so bad as they usually are, Joseph. Who's that?" she added—for she was seated where she could not see out, and had heard the gate click.

It was the postman : so I opened the glass doors.

"Only one, sir," said he, handing me the letter we had posted at Worcester the previous afternoon.

Mrs. Todhetley laughed as she opened it, saying it would have come sooner had we brought it with us. Looking to see that the bank-note was safe, she left it in the envelope on the breakfast-table.

"You may as well get it changed for me at Salmon's," she said, handing it to Tod as we were going out, "and then I need not disturb your father. But you must make haste back, for you know I want it."

She had no money in the house save a few shillings : and this was why the note was to be posted to her if we stayed at Worcester. You are often run short for money in rural country places : it's quite different from town, where the banks are at hand.

We went through North Crabb and met the doctor coming out at his door. Tod told him the Squire wanted some physicing.

"Got a cold, has he," cried Cole. "If he will only be reasonable and keep himself warm in bed, we'll soon have that out of him."

Cole lived close upon South Crabb—I think I've said so before. A few yards beyond his house the shops began. Salmon's was the fifth from the corner: a double shop, grocer's and draper's. The savings' bank was at Salmon's and the post-office: he was the busiest tradesman in South Crabb, rather conceited over it, but very intelligent. This is what occurred.

"Will you be good enough to change this five-pound note for me, Mr. Salmon?" says Tod, laying the note down on the grocer's counter, on the left of the door, behind which Salmon stood, his gray hair carefully brushed and a white apron on.

Salmon takes the note up for a moment, and then puts it down to unlock the inner draw of his till, where he kept his gold. He was counting out the five sovereigns when he paused; let them fall, and picked up the note with a snatch. I had seen his eyes fall on it.

"Where did you get this note from, sir?" asks he of Tod.

"From the Old Bank at Worcester."

"Well, it's one of them notes that was lost in the robbery at Tewkesbury, unless I'm much mistaken," cries Salmon, beginning to turn over the leaves of a small account-book that he fetched from the post-office desk. "Ay, I thought I was right," he adds, putting his finger to some figures on one of the pages. "I'd got the numbers correct enough in my head."

"You must be out of your mind, Salmon," retorts Tod in his defiant way. "That note was paid to my father yesterday at Worcester Old Bank."

"I don't think it was, sir."

"You don't think it was! Why, I was present. I saw Mr. Isaac count the notes out himself. Ten of them; and that was one."

"Mr. Isaac never counted out this note," persists Salmon.

He smoothed it out on the counter as he spoke. I had not noticed it before: but it struck me now as I looked at it that it was *not* the note I had put into the envelope at Worcester. That was a new, crisp note; this was not crisp, and it looked a little soiled. Tod turned passionate over it: he was just like the Squire in some things.

"I don't understand your behaviour, Salmon. I can swear that this note was one given with the nine others at the Bank yesterday, and given by Mr. Isaac."

Salmon shook his head. As much as to say he knew to the contrary.

"You'd better accuse Mr. Isaac of dealing in stolen notes—or me," cries hot Tod.

"You'd neither of you be likely to deal in them, Mr. Todhetley. There's a mistake somewhere. That's what it is. Mr. Isaac would be too glad to get this note into his possession to pay it away again

There's nobody more severe against money robberies than bankers themselves."

Salmon talked, and Tod talked; but neither could agree. The apprentice behind the counter on the drapery side listened with admiration, evidently not knowing which side to take. I spoke then; saying that the note did not appear to be the same as the one I had enclosed in the letter; and Tod looked as though he could knock me down for saying it. I had changed my clothes and had not Anna Whitney's letter with me.

"Tod, it is of no use your taking it up in this way. If the thing is so, it *is*. And it can soon be proved. I say I don't think it is the same note, or the same numbers."

"If I had taken down the numbers of a bank-note, I could remember what they were; so would any one but a muff, Johnny," says he sarcastically.

"I don't remember what they were. But I do seem to remember that they were not these."

Tod flung out in a passion: to him it seemed impossible that anything could be wrong with a note had direct from the bank. As to its not being the same note, he scouted it utterly. Had it dropped through the envelope and changed itself *en route* from Worcester? he sarcastically demanded—coming in again to ask it.

Salmon was quietly going over the circumstances of the Tewkesbury robbery to me. About three weeks before a butcher's shop was robbed in Tewkesbury—the till carried off in open day. It had gold and silver in it and two five-pound notes. The numbers of the notes happened to be known, and notice of them was circulated, to put people on their guard against taking them.

"Look here, Mr. Ludlow," said Salmon, showing me the two numbers of the stolen notes written down in his book, and comparing the one with the bank-note we had taken to him. "It's the same you see. Reason's reason, sir."

"But I don't see how it's practicable," cried Tod, coming round the least bit in the world, as he condescended to look himself at the numbers.

"Well, sir, neither do I—the facts being as you state 'em," acknowledged Salmon. "But here's the proof to stagger us, you observe. It's in black and white."

"There must be two notes with the same numbers," said Tod.

Salmon smiled: great in his assumption of superior knowledge. "There never was yet, Mr. Todhetley."

"Who numbers the notes, I wonder? I suppose mistakes are not impossible to those who do it, any more than to other people."

"No fear of that, sir, with their system. The note has been changed in the post."

"Nonsense," retorted Tod.

They'd have cavilled until night with no result, one holding out against the other. Tod brought away the note and the five sovereigns—which Salmon offered: "We could send over another note at leisure," he said. I examined the envelope as we hastened home: it was the same we had posted at Worcester, and did not seem to have been tampered with.

Getting Anna Whitney's letter out of my best clothes' pocket, I brought it to Tod. The numbers were quite different from the note's. He stared like one bewildered: his eyes passing between those on the letter, and those on the note.

"Johnny, this beats bull-baiting."

So it did. For mystification.

"Are you sure you copied the figures correctly, old fellow?"

"Now Tod! Of course I did. And the letters too."

"Let's go up to the Pater."

The Pater was getting up, in defiance of old Cole and of Mrs. Todhetley, and was dressed up to his coat. He had got a fire in his room and his white night-cap on. I told him about the note. Tod was outside, telling Mrs. Todhetley. He did not receive the news kindly.

"The note I gave you to put into the envelope, was one of those stolen from the butcher at Tewkesbury! How dare you bring your rubbishy stories to me, Mr. Johnny!"

I tried to explain how it was—that it was not the same note; as the numbers proved. He'd hear nothing at first, only went on at me, stamping his slippers and nodding his head, with the big white tassel of the night-cap bobbing up and down. If Salmon dared to say he had sent him a stolen note to change, he'd teach Salmon what slander meant the next day the magistrates sat.

Tod came in then with Mrs. Todhetley. The Squire had talked himself quiet and I got a hearing: showing him the numbers I had taken down outside Anna's letter and the numbers on the stolen bank-note. It brought him to reason.

"Why, bless my heart! How can they have been changed, Johnny?"

Getting the packet of notes out of his pocket-book, he went over their numbers. They were all consecutive, the nine of them; and so was the tenth, the one I had taken down. He pushed his night-cap back and stared at us.

"Did you two get larking yesterday and drop the letter on your way to the post?"

"We took it straight to the post, sir, and put it safely in."

"I don't know that I'd answer for it," stormed the Squire. "Once dropped in the street, there's no knowing who might pick it up, or what tricks might be played with it. Hold your tongues, you two. How

else do you suppose it could have been done? We don't live in the days of miracles."

Off went his night-cap, on went his coat. Ringing the bell until it was answered, he ordered the phaeton to be got ready on the instant, to take him to the station: he was going to Worcester. Mrs. Todhetley quite implored him not; as good as went down on her knees: he would increase his cold, and perhaps be laid up. But he'd not listen. "Hang the cold," he said: "he had no cold; it was gone. People shouldn't have it to say that tricks could be played on him with impunity, and stolen notes substituted for honest ones."

"What a way he puts himself into!" laughed Tod, when he had ordered us off to make ready.

"I know somebody else who does just the same."

"You'll get it presently, Johnny."

Away we went to the station, Bob and Blister spanking along and Tod driving: the Squire, wrapped in about fifteen rugs and five comforters, sitting beside him. Dwarf Giles was behind with me: he would have to take the carriage back. A train came up pretty soon, and we got to Worcester.

Of all commotions, the Squire made the worst. When he got to the bank, Mr. Isaac was out: would not be in till three o'clock: and that put the finishing stroke on the Pater's impatience. Next he went to the Star, and told of the matter there, gathering half the house about him. The post office was taken next. They seemed to know nothing whatever about the letter—and I don't think they did—had not particularly noticed it in sorting: could not have seemed to see less had they been in a fog at sea: except one thing, and that they'd swear to—that every letter posted at the office the previous day, and all other days, had been duly forwarded, untampered with, to its destination.

The first dawn of reason that fell over us was in the interview with Mr. Isaac. It was pleasant to be with anybody so cheerfully calm. Taking the roll of five-pound notes in his hand, he pronounced them to be the same he had given us on the previous day; and the number I had dotted down to have been the one belonging to the tenth note.

"And is this one of those two stolen ones that were advertised?" demanded the Squire, putting it into Mr. Isaac's hands.

Mr. Isaac spoke with a clerk for a minute—perhaps referring to the numbers as Salmon had done—and came back saying that it was the note. So there we were: the matter laid, so far, to rest. Nothing could be more unsatisfactory. The Squire sat quite still, as if he had been struck dumb.

"I'm sure I shall never see daylight out of this," cried the Squire in a kind of hopeless, mazy tone. "It's worse than conjuring."

Mr. Isaac was called away. The Squire fastened upon one of the

old clerks, and went over the matter with him. He could not readily understand it.

"The note must have been changed, Mr. Todhetley," said he.

"Changed in the post?"

"Changed somewhere."

"But who did it?"

"That's the question."

The Squire could not tear himself away. Once out of the bank he would be at a nonplus. He began casting a doubt on the Worcester post office; the clerk retorted that there was a post office at our end, Timberdale: and at that the Squire fired. Each would have held out for the good faith of his respective post office to the death. It put Tod and me in mind of the fable of the crows, each old mother saying that her own young crow was the whitest. After glaring at one another for a bit through their spectacles, they shook hands and parted.

We got home to a late dinner at Crabb Cot, just as wise as we had left it in the morning. The Squire had an awful cold, though he'd not admit it. At nine o'clock he virtually gave in, went up to bed, and said Molly was to make him a basin of hot gruel, and we might put a drop of brandy in it.

The mode of conveying the letters from Worcester was this. The Timberdale bag, made up at the Worcester office, was brought out at night by the late train, and dropped at the Timberdale station. The postmaster of Timberdale (if you can give that title to one in so insignificant a place) would be at the station to receive it, and carried it home.

His name was Rymer. A man of standing respectability in the place, and of good connections. He had been brought up for a surgeon, but somehow never got the chance to pass; and, years and years ago, opened a chemist's and druggist's shop at Timberdale. Then he added on other things: stationery, Christmas cards, valentines, boy's marbles, purses, and such like, which his wife attended to. In time he got the post office. As to suspecting Rymer of doing anything wrong with the note, it was not to be thought of. He had two children: a son, who seemed never to do any good for himself, and no sooner got a situation than he was home from it again; and a daughter, a nice little girl of sixteen, who was as useful amid the drugs and the post office work as her father.

Timberdale had two letter-carriers. One for the the place itself, the other for the country round. This last had a regular journey of it, for the farm houses were scattered. There had always been a talk about our two houses—the Squire's and old Coney's—being put in the Timberdale district for delivery, and why it was originally done could not be made out; seeing that we were ever so far off Timberdale, and in Crabb parish. But nobody stirred themselves to alter it, and so the

old custom went on. The out-postman was Lee: a trustworthy old soul with shaky legs.

It was the next morning. Cole the surgeon came in vexed. The Squire ought not to have got up at all the past day, he said, much less have gone to Worcester; and where was the use of his prescribing remedies if they were not attended to. Upon that, the Squire (after retorting that he should do as he pleased in spite of Cole and his remedies, and speaking out of a kind of foggy hoarseness) told about posting the bank-note to Mrs. Todhetley, and what had come of it.

"Well, it's a strange thing," said Cole, when he had turned the news about in his mind. "What do you think, Johnny?"

He would often say to me when talking of things and people "What do *you* think?" He had a theory that I saw clearly. Of course I had nothing particular to think about this: it seemed a hopeless puzzle.

"Lee's sure," said Cole, speaking of the postman; "so is Rymer. There's no other hands it could have been in on this side."

"The Worcester side swear it was not tampered with on their's."

"Have you questioned Rymer about it?"

"Not yet," croaked the Squire. "I meant to have gone to him to-day."

"Which you'll not do," cried Mr. Cole. "But now, look here: I'd not tell people at first that the substituted note was one of those stolen ones, if I were you: not even Rymer. Nobody likes to be mixed up with robberies. You'd put folks on their guard at once; and any chance word of enlightenment that might otherwise be dropped, would be kept in."

We did not quite take him.

"I'd not," continued Cole.

"But we must enquire about it," said Tod. "What's to be said of the note?"

"Say that the bank-note you put in was changed en route for another one: that the numbers did not tally. That's all you need tell at first."

Tod could not see the reason in the argument; but the Squire took up the idea eagerly: and ordered Tod to do as was suggested. He was unable to go to Timberdale himself, but far too impatient to let it rest until another day: and so Tod was to be his deputy.

With at least five hundred suggestions and injunctions from the Squire—who only ceased when his voice disappeared completely—we set off, taking the way of the Ravine. It was a fine spring day: the trees were coming into leaf, the thorns and other bushes were budding; violets and primroses nestled at their feet. I picked some early cowslips for a ball for Lena, and some double white sweet violets for Mrs. Todhetley.

Past the Court, went we—but there's nothing to tell of that to-day

—past Jael Batty's and the other straggling cottages, and came to the village street. It was paved: and you can't say that of all villages.

Mr. Rymer was behind his counter: a delicate-faced, thin man, with a rather sad expression and mild brown eyes. In spite of his poor clothes and his white apron, and the obscure shop he had served in for twenty years, his face had "gentleman" plainly written in it: but he gave you the idea of being too meek spirited; as if in any struggle with the world he could never take his own part.

The shop was a double shop, resembling Salmon's in shape and arrangements. The drugs and chemicals were on the left hand side as you entered; the miscellaneous wares on the other. Horse and cattle medicines were kept with the drugs: and other things too numerous to mention, such as pearl barley, pickles, and fish-sauce. The girl, Margaret Rymer, was serving a woman with a pennyworth of writing paper when we went in (three sheets to the penny), and a postage-stamp. Tod asked for Mr. Rymer.

He came forward from the little parlour, at one end of which was the desk where he did his postal work.

Upon Tod's saying that we wished to speak with him privately, he took us into the parlour. As we sat down opposite to him I could not help thinking what a nice face he had. It was getting very care-worn. A stranger would have given him more than his forty-five years: though the bright brown hair was good still. Tod told his story. The chemist looked thoroughly surprised, but open and upright as the day. I saw at once that no fault attached to him.

"A bank-note exchanged as it passed through the post!" he exclaimed. "But, Mr. Todhetley, the thing seems impossible."

"It is so," said Tod. "I was just as unwilling to believe it at first: but facts are facts."

"I cannot see the motive," said Rymer. "Why should one bank-note be taken out of a letter, if another were substituted?"

Tod looked at me. Wanting to say that the other was a stolen note, and was no doubt put in to be got rid of. But the Squire had tied us down.

"Had the note been simply abstracted from the letter, we should be at no loss to understand that a thief had helped himself to it; but a thief would not put another note of the same value in its place," went on Rymer.

"Well, the facts are as I tell you, Mr. Rymer," returned Tod, inwardly impatient at being trammelled and having to tell so lame a tale. "One bank-note was taken out of the letter and another put in its place. We want you to help us discover the mystery."

"I will help you to the utmost of my power," was Rymer's answer.

"But—are you sure you have told me the circumstances correctly?"

"Quite sure," answered wrathful Tod. "The thing was done between

Worcester post office and our house. How was it done, and by whom? That's the question."

"You enclosed the note in the letter yourself, at Worcester on Wednesday afternoon, and put it into the post office: when we delivered the letter at Crabb Cot yesterday morning, you found the note inside had been taken out and another put in? These are the circumstances?"

"Precisely so. Except that it was not I who enclosed the note and took down its number but Johnny Ludlow. The Worcester office disclaims all fingering in the matter, and so we are thrown on this side of the journey. Did you go to the station yourself for the bag of letters, Rymer?"

"I did, sir. I brought it home and sorted the letters at that desk—turning to it—ready for the two men to take out in the morning. I had used to sort all the letters in the morning, London and others; but lately I've done what we call the local bags—that come in before bed-time—at night. It saves time in the morning."

"Do you recollect noticing the letter for Crabb Cot?"

"I think I noticed it. Yes, I feel sure I did. You see, there's nearly always something or other for you, so that it's not remarkable. But I am sure I did notice the letter."

"No one could have got to it in the night?"

"What—here?" exclaimed Rymer, opening his eyes in surprise that such a question should be put. "No, certainly not. The letter-bags are locked up in this desk, and I keep the key about me."

"And you gave them as usual to Lee in the morning?"

Mr. Rymer knitted his patient brow the least in the world, as if he thought that Tod's pursuing these questions reflected some suspicion on him. He answered very meekly—going over the whole from the first.

"When I brought the Worcester bag in on Wednesday night, I was at home alone: my wife and daughter happened to be spending the evening with some friends, and the servant had asked leave to go out. I sorted the letters, and locked them up as usual in one of the deep drawers of the desk. I never unlocked it again until the last thing in the morning, when the other letters that had come in were ready to go out, and the two men were waiting for them. The letter would be in Lee's packet of course—which I delivered to him. But he is to be depended on: he would not tamper with it. That is the whole history so far as I am connected with it, Mr. Todhetley. I could not tell you more if I talked till mid-day."

"What's that, Thomas? Anything amiss with the letters?" called out a voice at this juncture, as the inner door opened, that shut out the kitchen.

I knew it. Knew it for Mrs. Rymer's. I didn't like her a bit: and however a refined man like Rymer (and in mind he was so) could have made her his wife seemed to be a seven days' wonder. She had a nose

as long as from Crabb Ravine to the First of April; and her hair and face were red, and her flounces fine. As common a woman as you'd see in a summer's day, with a broad Brummagem accent. But she was very capable, and not unkindly natured. The worst Timberdale said of her was, that she had done her best to spoil that ugly son of hers.

Putting her head, ornamented with yellow curl-papers, round the door-post, she saw us seated there, and drew it away again. Her sleeves were stripped up and she had a coarse apron on; altogether not dressed for company. Letting the door stand ajar, she asked again if anything was amiss, and went on with her work at the same time: which sounded like the chopping of suet. Mr. Rymer replied in a curt word or two, as if he felt annoyed she should interfere. She would not be put off: strong-minded women never are: and he had to give the explanation. A five-pound bank-note had been mysteriously lost out of a letter addressed to Mrs. Todhetley. The chopping stopped.

"Stolen out of it?"

"Well—yes; it may be said so."

"But why do you call it mysterious?"

Mr. Rymer said why. That the bank-note had not, in one sense, been stolen; since another of the same value had been substituted for it.

Chop, chop, chop: Mrs. Rymer had begun again vigorously.

"I'd like to know who's to make top or tail of such a story as that," she called out presently. "*Has* anything been lost, or not?"

"Yes, I tell you, Susannah: a five-pound note."

Forgetting her curl-papers and the apron, Mrs. Rymer came boldly inside the room, chopping-knife in hand, and requested further enlightenment. We told her between us: she stood with her back against the door-post while she listened.

"When do you say this took place, young gents?"

"On Wednesday night, or Thursday morning. When the letter got to us at breakfast time, the job was done."

She said no more then, but went back and chopped faster than ever. Tod and I had got up to go when she came in again.

"The odd part about it is, their putting in a note for the same value," cried she. "I never heard of such a thing as that. Why not spend the other note, and make no bother over it?"

"You would be quite justified in doing so under the circumstances, Mr. Todhetley," said the quieter husband.

"But we can't," returned Tod, hotly—and all but said more than he was to say.

"Why not?" asked she.

"Because it's not ours; there, Mrs. Rymer."

"Well, I know what I'd say—if the chance was given me," returned she, resenting Tod's manner. "That the note found in the letter was

the one put into it at Worcester. Changed in the post! It does not stand to reason."

"But, my dear,"—her husband was beginning.

"Now, Thomas Rymer, that's what I *think*: and so would you, if you had a grain of sense beyond a gander's. And now good morning, young gents: my pudding won't get done for dinner at this rate."

Mr. Rymer came with us through the shop to the door. I shook hands with him: and Tod's nose went up in the air. But I think it lies in what you see a man is, by mind and nature, whether he is your equal, and you feel proud to think he is—not in his wearing an apron. There are some lords in the land I'd not half care to shake hands with as I would with Thomas Rymer.

"I hope you will pardon me for reverting to my first opinion, Mr. Todhetley," he said, turning to Tod—"but indeed I think there must be some mistake. Mrs. Rymer may be right—that the note found in the letter was the one put into it."

Tod flung away. The facts he had obstinately refused to believe at first, he had so fully adopted now, that any other opinion offended him. He was stamping when I got up.

"To think that the Pater should have sent us there like two fools, Johnny! Closing our mouths so that we could not speak the truth."

"Rymer only three parts believes it. His wife not at all."

"Sugar his wife! It's nothing to her. And all through the suggestion of that precious calf, Cole. Johnny, I think I shall act on my own judgment, and go back and tell Rymer the note was a stolen one."

"The Pater told us not to."

"Stuff! Circumstances alter cases. He would have told it himself before he had been with Rymer two minutes. The man's hands are partly tied, you see; knowing only half of the tale."

"Well; I won't tell him."

"Nobody asked you. Here goes. And the Squire will say I've done right."

Rymer was standing at his door still. The shop was empty, and there were no ears near. Tod lowered his voice though.

"The truth is, Mr. Rymer, that the note substituted in the letter for ours, was one of those two lost by the butcher at Tewkesbury. I conclude you heard of the robbery."

"One of those two!" exclaimed Rymer.

"Yes: Salmon at South Crabb recognized it yesterday, when we were asking him to give change for it."

"But why not have told me this at once, Mr. Todhetley?"

"Because the Squire and Cole, laying their wise heads together this morning, thought it might be better not to let that much get abroad: it would put people on their guard, they said. You see now where the motive lay for the exchange of notes."

"Of course I do," said Mr. Rymer in his quiet way. But it is very unaccountable. I cannot imagine where the treason lies."

"Not on this side, seemingly," remarked Tod. "The letter appears to have passed through nobody's hands but Lee's: and he's safe."

"Safe and sure. It must have been accomplished at Worcester. Or—in the railway train," he slowly added. "I have heard of such things."

"You had better keep counsel at present as to the stolen note, Mr. Rymer."

"I will until you give me leave to speak. All I can do to assist in the discovery is heartily at Squire Todhetley's service. I'd transport these rogues, for my part."

We carried our report home—that the thing had not been, and could not have been, effected on the Timberdale side; unless old Lee was to be suspected. Which was out of the question.

Time went on, and it grew into more of a mystery than ever. Not as to the fact itself or the stolen note, for all that was soon known high and low. The Worcester office exonerated itself from suspicion, as did the railway letter van. The van let off its resentment in a little private sneering; but the office waxed hot, and declared the fraud must lie at the door of Timberdale. And so the matter was given up for a bad job, the Squire submitting to the loss of his good note.

But a curious circumstance occurred, connected with Thomas Rymer. And, to me, his behaviour had seemed curious nearly throughout. Not at that first interview: as I said, he was open, and, so to say, indifferent then: but soon afterwards his manner changed.

On the day following that interview, the Squire, who was very restless over it, wanting the thing to come to light in no time, sent me again to Rymer's place, to know if he had gleaned anything. Rymer said he had not: and his manner was just what it had been the past day. I could have staked my life, if necessary, that the man *believed* what he said—that news must be looked for elsewhere, not at Timberdale: I am sure that he thought it simply impossible the theft could have been effected after the letters came into his hands. But—some days later on, when the whole matter had been disclosed, and the public knew as much about it as we did, the Squire—well of his cold, except for sniffing—thought he would have a talk with Rymer himself, went over, and took me with him.

I shall not forget it. In Rymer's window, the chemical side, there was a picture of a bullock eating up some newly-invented cattle-food and growing fat upon it. It caught the Squire's eye. While he stopped to read the advertisement, I went in. The moment Rymer saw me—his daughter called to him to come out of the parlour where he was at dinner—his face turned first red, and then of a ghastly whiteness.

"Mr. Todhetley thought he would like to come and see you, Mr. Rymer."

"Yes; yes," he said, in an agitated kind of tone, and then he stooped to put some jars closer together under the counter—but I thought he knew how white he was and wanted to hide it. When the Squire came in, asking first of all about the new cattle-food, he noticed nothing. Rymer was pretty nigh himself then: and said he had taken the agency of it, and old Massock had ordered some.

Then they talked about the note. Rymer's tone was quite different from what it had been before: though whether I should have noticed it but for his white face, I can hardly tell. That had made me notice *him*. He spoke in a low, timid voice, saying no more than he was obliged, as if the subject frightened him. One thing I saw: that his hands trembled. Some camomile blows lay on a white paper on the counter, and he began doing them up with shaky fingers.

Was his wife given to eaves-dropping? I should have thought not: she was too independent for it. But, there she was—standing just within the little parlour and certainly listening. The Squire caught sight of her gown-tail, and called out "How d'y'e do, Mrs. Rymer?"—upon which she came forward. There was a scared look on her face also, as if its impudence had shrunk out of it. She did not stay an instant, just answered the Squire and went away again.

"We must come to the bottom of the business somehow, you know, Rymer," concluded the Squire as he was leaving. "It would never do to let the thief get off. What I should think is—that it must be the same fellow who robbed the butcher——"

"No, no," hastily interrupted Rymer.

"No! One of the gang then. Any way, you'll help us all you can, I should like to bring the lot to trial. If you get to learn anything send me word at once."

Rymer answered Yes, and attended us to the door. Then the Squire went back to the cattle-food; but we got away at last.

"Thomas Rymer breaks, Johnny, I think. He doesn't seem in spirits somehow. It's hard for a man to be in a shop all day long, from year's end to year's end, and never get an hour's holiday."

Ever after this, when the affair was spoken of with Rymer, he showed more or less the same kind of shrinking: as if the subject gave him some terrible pain. Nobody else noticed it: and I only did because I looked out for it. I believe he saw I thought something; for when he caught my eye, as he did more than once, his own fell.

But the curious circumstance connected with him has to be told yet. One summer evening when it was getting towards dusk, he came over to Crab Cot to see the Squire. Very much to the Pater's surprise, Rymer put a five-pound note into his hand.

"Is the money found?" cried he, eagerly.

"No, sir, it is not found," said Rymer in a subdued tone. "It seems likely to remain a mystery to the last. But I wish to restore

it myself. It lies upon my conscience—being postmaster here—that such a loss should have taken place. With three parts of the public, and more, it is the Timberdale side that gets the credit of being to blame. And so—it weighs heavily upon me. Though I don't see how I could have prevented it: and I lay awake night after night, thinking it over."

The Squire stared for awhile, and then pushed back the note.

"Why goodness, man!" cried he, when his amazement let him speak, "you don't suppose I'd take the money from you! What in the world right should you have to bear the loss? You must be dreaming."

"I should feel better satisfied," said poor Rymer, in his subdued voice of pain. "Better satisfied."

"And how do you think I should feel," stamped the Squire, nearly flinging the note into the fire. "Here, put it up; put it up. Why, my good fellow, don't, for mercy's sake, let this bother take your senses away. It's no more your fault that the letter was rifled than it was mine. Well, this is a start—your coming to say this."

They went on, battling it out. Rymer praying for him to take the note as if he'd pray his life away; the Squire accusing the other of having gone clean mad, to think of such a thing. I happened to go into the room in the midst, but they'd not leisure to look at me. It ended in Rymer's taking back the note: it could not have ended in any other manner: the Squire vowing, if he did not, that he should go before the magistrates for lunacy.

"Get the port wine, Johnny."

Rymer declined to take any: his head was not accustomed to wine, he said. The Squire poured out a bumper and made him drink it: telling him he believed it was something of the kind his head wanted, or it would never have got such a wild notion into it as the errand he had come upon that evening.

A few minutes after Rymer had left, I heard the Squire shouting to me, and went back to the room. He had in his hand a little thin note-case of green leather, something like two leaves folded together.

"Rymer must have dropped this, Johnny, in putting it into his pocket. The note is in it. You had better run after him."

I took it, and went out. But the question was—which way had Rymer gone? We could see far along the solitary road, and it was light enough yet, but nobody was in view, so I guessed he was taking the short-cut through the Ravine, braving the ghost, and I went swinging down the zigzag path. Wasn't it gloomy there!

Well, it was a surprise! He had sat down on the stump of a tree, and was sobbing with all his might: great loud sobs and moans that prevented his hearing me. There was no time for me to draw back, or for him to hide his trouble. I could only hold out the green case, and make the best of it.

"I am afraid you are in some great trouble, Mr. Rymer?"

He got up and swallowed all his sobs at once.

"The best of us have trouble at times, Master Johnny."

"What can I do for you?"

"Nothing. Nothing. Except forget that you have seen me giving way to it. It was very foolish of me : but there are moments when—when one loses self-control."

Either through his awkwardness or mine, the leaves of the case opened, and the bank-note fluttered out. I picked it up and gave it to him. Our eyes met in the gloom.

"I think you know," he whispered.

"I think I suspect. Don't be afraid : no one else does : and I'll never drop a hint to mortal man."

Putting my hand into his that he might feel its warm clasp, he took it as it was meant, and wrung it in answer. Had we been of the same age, I could have felt henceforth like his brother.

"It will be my death-blow," he whispered. "Heaven knows I was not prepared for it. I was unsuspicious as a child."

He went his way with his grief and his load of care, and I went mine, my heart aching for him. I am older now than I was then : and have learnt to think that God sends these dreadful troubles to try us, that we may fly from them to Him. Why else *should* they come?

And I daresay you have guessed how it was. The time came when it was all disclosed ; so I don't break my faith in telling. That ill-doing son of his had been the thief. He was staying at home at the time with the note stolen from Tewkesbury in his possession : some of his bad companions had promised him a bonus if he could succeed in passing it. It was his mother who surreptitiously got the keys of the desk for him, that he might open it in the night : he made the excuse to her that there was a letter in the Worcester bag for himself under a false direction, which he must secure, unsuspected. To do Madam Rymer justice, she thought no worse : and it was she who in her fright, when the commotion arose about the Tewkesbury note, confessed to her husband that she had let him have the keys that night. There could be no further doubt in either of their minds after that. The son, too, had decamped. It was to look for our letter he had wanted the keys. For he knew it might be coming : he was on the platform at the railway station in the morning—I saw him standing there—and must have heard what Mrs. Todhetley said. And that was the whole of the mystery.

But I'd have given the money from my own pocket twice over, to have prevented its happening, for Thomas Rymer's sake.

JOHNNY LUDLOW.

HOW A FAIRY TALE ENDED.

A STORY IN THREE CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER III.

THE express had deposited its Hereford passengers, and Major Herman, with a lady on his arm, came out of the station to where his carriage waited. He had put his companion into her seat, and was about to take the reins, when he caught sight of a gentleman entering the booking-office. "Excuse me, Agatha," he said, following and stopping him. "You have been to the Maples, to-day, I suppose, Dr. Sheppey."

"Yes; I have but just come from there."

"And how is—Mr. Kennard?"

"Just the same; and little Freddy better, but still pining for his twin-brother; others all well except Miss Josephine, who is over-anxious, and I fear, a little overworked. They will be glad to see you back, Major Herman."

Very quiet was Noel as he drove through the town, and Miss Denison pondered for a reason.

"I have told you every earthly thing, Noel, and you have told me nothing. Who were you asking after—all those people?"

"Do you already forget all I have told you of the Kennards?" Noel answered, simply.

"Certainly not. Is it Miss Kennard who is over-anxious and over worked?"

"It is she of whom Dr. Sheppey says it."

"What is this child like, Noel? describe her to me as you could not do in a letter."

After a scarcely perceptible pause, Noel looked round, laughing.

"Then I will borrow some one else's words to tell you in. 'Methinks she is too low for a high praise, too brown for a fair praise, and too little for a great praise.'"

"Altogether, I suppose, she, too, is a hero," laughed Agatha.

"You can judge for yourself, Agatha, as you are to be neighbours."

"Yes, I shall cultivate her; I am tired of girls like myself. Are not you tired of me yet, Noel?"

He smiled a little. "You give me no opportunity to be," he said, "you have kept so far away from me when you could."

She felt, perhaps for the first time, that this had pained him; and wondered at it in her mind; the very consciousness making her very

sweet and gentle to him when she came into the quiet house, with a new element of bright, careless gaiety, making a pretty picture herself, in the lamp-light, sitting beside Mrs. Herman, chatting lightly and gently of the world in which she had been moving; turning with irresistible smiles and sauciness to Noel every now and then. Noel, who followed with dreamy, questioning eyes, every action of the tall, graceful figure, and every change on the fair blooming face.

"How proud he ought to have been of her! how little he deserved the smallest portion of any love she could give him!" ran his eager thoughts; she was come at last, and the road was plainly marked before him—so clearly and distinctly marked!

The very second day of her visit, Agatha made Noel take her to the Maples. She was quite eager for the call she told him. And along the road that was so often trodden by him he took her on this sunny April morning.

In the little drawing-room, with the sunlight pouring in upon them, the two girls met; each trying unconsciously to grasp the nature of the other. Josie had been sitting on the floor, beside Freddy's sofa, as they came in, and when she rose, Agatha drew her own chair to the spot, and took Freddy under her immediate protection, asking him gentle common-place questions in which her eyes bore very little part, and her thoughts none at all. And Josie—neither conscious nor shy, but with just the quaint childish manner of old—told Major Herman the many things he desired to know after his long absence of three days.

Then they, too, joined Agatha and Freddy, and the earnestness of Agatha Denison's bright eyes deepened a little as she turned to the window, while Noel told Freddy the wonderful adventures he had had, and gave him the wonderful presents he had brought.

"Miss Kennard," said Agatha, suddenly, looking into the little dark face beside her, "did you ever know anyone so pleasant with children as Major Herman?"

"I think my brothers are as pleasant with them," she answered, gently.

Miss Denison, without removing her eyes, laughed a little. "Of course; but then he is not a brother. He is like, who was it? who had 'a childly way with children.' But I suppose you would not know, you have not time to read romances."

"Oh, I know Leolin Averill very well," said Josephine. simply.

"You do find time for romances, then?"

"Yes, a good many," answered Josie, lightly.

"You seem such a child," said Agatha, gently laying a hand on her shoulder, "that I can hardly fancy you out of the schoolroom."

"I think I ought to be in it, indeed," Josie said, earnestly. "I know nothing—to be nearly eighteen!"

On their way home Agatha repeated this little speech to Noel, laughing merrily.

"Her not having been taught more is no pity at all," said Noel, gravely, "she teaches all the better."

"Noel," said Agatha, gravely, too, "did it strike you, to-day, what a contrast we two girls were?"

"Why should that strike me?" he answered, rather hastily.

"I don't know why, but I think it did; tell me how."

"I do not think it struck me at all, dear," he said, very gently, "but I will tell you something that did, though you will, of course, hardly understand it. The change there is in that child's face since the day I first saw her, standing where she stood with you to-day."

"What change, Noel?" she asked, looking straight along the road in front of them.

"That I do not know; I cannot understand it myself, I only see it."

"The change from a child to a woman, perhaps?" asked Agatha in a low voice, "which comes upon us sometimes unawares."

"It may be so; but she has had sorrow and anxiety enough to change anyone, has not she? quite enough to complete the contrast you spoke of between her and yourself, Agatha dear."

Agatha pondered this a little in her mind, feeling, with woman's wisdom, that this could not do it alone.

From that day Agatha Denison took it into her head—or into her heart, perhaps—to find her way to the Maples very often indeed, lightly taking Josie's excuse that Freddy could not spare her to return these perpetual calls.

One bright Saturday afternoon far on in May, they persuaded Josie to drive with them, and she had sat beside Noel (for the last time, she said to herself, knowing he was going away with Agatha on the Monday), with Freddy lying beside her among the cushions; and Agatha cheerily talking to them from the back seat; then they had come to the Maples to spend their last evening together. Mr. Kennard had roused himself to talk to Agatha, who was a pleasant intelligent companion; then Noel had wheeled his chair to the foot of the stairs where Donald and Will waited to carry it up; and Josie held up little Freddy to receive his kisses.

"Good-night, dear," said Noel, tenderly, as the child's face nestled a moment beside his own. "These little cheeks will be round and red when I come back, and these lazy little feet running everywhere, but you won't forget poor Noel?"

"No; I'll never forget you, Noel," said Freddy, softly, and Josie turned her head away a little wearily.

"Of course you will forget me," said Agatha, with an odd shakiness in her gay voice; "but if you do, it shall be Noel's fault."

"You'll see how I'll remember," and the tiny hand touched Agatha's bright cheek. "Is this a tear?"

She laughed, giving him into his sister's arms.

"Mythical ideas children get sometimes," she said, lightly. "Now Josie, 'you won't be long away, be sure,' I would sing that until you come back, only Noel dislikes it, I fancy."

"You would only have time for one verse," said Josie, as she went. "Will you try?"

But no sound of music followed her, and if she had re-entered suddenly, she would have been astonished to see how two people, betrothed, and on the eve of marriage, amused themselves when left alone. Agatha, lying back in her low easy chair, her hands idle in her lap—looked out over the silent, restful landscape with sad and thoughtful eyes, that never turned or drooped.

Noel—his arms folded and his eyes bent on the carpet—walked slowly backwards and forwards, from end to end of the little room, as silent as she was. Presently Donald came in, with the bright, bonny face of old, but otherwise changed indescribably. The agony and remorse of one night, and the better thoughts and aims of the months that followed, had left little of the Donald of old, save the handsome face and winning manners. There was no wavering restlessness on the young eyes now, no reckless weakness on the merry lips. The face had lost its boyish *insouciance*, but had gained immeasurably in other things; and the thorough self-forgetfulness of the lad showed in every action. He came and stood at the window opposite Agatha, talking to her with a certain easy courtesy that many an older man might have envied.

Noel slackened his pace a little, but still walked on. Then Will came in, ignoring his books for this last night, and sat down on a low seat beside Agatha; while she turned her bright eyes to him, and drew him on to talk. She was always fond of drawing out Will; proud of it, too, a little, knowing how shy and reserved he was to everyone but his sister. Noel overheard a little of the conversation, but had not stopped in his slow, thoughtful walk when Josephine came in again, with heavy shadows in her dark eyes.

"I don't call that a fault at all, Will," said Agatha, cheerily, her quick eyes noticing why Noel stopped at last. "As for me, I look upon ambition as one of the cardinal virtues."

Donald and Will both laughed, and as they did so, Agatha, smiling too, listened if the other voices in the room were speaking. No; not a word, and as the talk went merrily on, Josie came forward quietly, in her soft, black dress and took the seat Donald gave her. Then Noel leaned against the window opposite Donald and, looking down upon the girls, stood thus quite silently, save for a few words now and then when he was particularly addressed. At last, almost imperceptibly, Agatha—

who had led the conversation and been the chief talker—drew back gradually into silence too, as she watched and listened.

So the shadows lengthened, and the twilight deepened round them, as they sat in the window looking less at each other than out upon the quietness of the summer evening, until Donald noticed Agatha's dreamy attitude and something on her face which he had never seen before.

"Miss Denison is not used to so many boys about her as you are, Joe," he said. "We tire her, I fear."

"Does your head ache, Miss Denison?" asked Will, anxiously.

"My head ache? No; why should my head ache?"

"You are so silent."

Suddenly her face assumed a woe-begone expression. "I have such horrible toothache sometimes," she said, "I don't know what to do with myself when it comes on."

Full of regret for having been unobservant and heedless, Josie's sympathetic little face bent over her. "Oh, it's gone now," said Agatha, unable to keep up the expression necessary to a continuation of the malady, "quite gone, thank you." And easily and gracefully—as she did everything—she rose and bade them all good night.

"Do not let us call it good-bye," she said, "we shall meet in church to-morrow, at any rate: or, stay! let me say good-bye, because to undergo an operation oneself is not bad; but I forbid Noel to say it, one cannot bear to look at the same operation performed on others."

"In this mood you will have your tiresome tooth out, Miss Denison," laughed Don.

"I think I shall," she said, with a funny little smile in the corners of her mouth. "I have made up my mind to it. Noel, no good-byes for you."

Noel's eyes said—against his will—that this was rather a selfish speech, but he was not sorry to abide by it, and after Agatha's warm good-byes his leave-taking sounded quiet and indifferent. The soft still peacefulness of the May twilight crept into their hearts as Noel and Agatha walked home arm-in-arm along the quiet old familiar road; and it did not seem strange to either that they should walk so in silence. Nor did it seem strange that, when at last Agatha broke this silence, it should be in a subdued and softened voice that took its tone more from the one quiet thought in her heart than from the universal quiet around her.

"Noel," she said, as they turned into the garden at Hillfield, "come down the river-walk, please. I want to speak to you alone there."

They passed the house, and walked on till they came to a rustic terrace over the river, which Noel had covered with ferns and rock-plants. Drawing her hand from his arm, Agatha folded hers upon the wood-work and looked down the dim surface of the river.

"It is very pretty here, Noel," she said, at last.

"This is a favourite spot of mine, dear," he said, trying not to show

any surprise at her bringing him here. "I had the myosotis beautiful here last year."

"Had you?"

He, too, was leaning on the ivy now, looking over and down to where, in an artificial cave, he kept two horned owls. He watched and waited for some movement from them, wondering why he did so all through the silence that followed her short answer.

He began to think he heard them, when Agatha suddenly turned a gay, piquante face to his, laughing out cheerily in the gloaming.

"Noel, tell me that long thought?"

He answered, astonished. "Your's was longer, Agatha; you were silent so long I was obliged to fall back upon a very commonplace one. Tell me your's first."

"That is just what I intend to do. Noel, I can never come to live at Hillfield."

At first he laughed, in light incredulity. "Then we must have a house elsewhere, must we?"

"No; I shall not be happy in any house you take."

As he gathered her meaning slowly, his face grew white and angry.

"How long have we been engaged now, Noel?"

She asked it so indifferently and carelessly that he could frame no answer, though she waited for it.

"Never mind," she went on, "I know it near enough; almost six years: and a very pleasant six years they have been, for we have been merely friends, never lovers as—as I understand it now. Noel, let us be always just so: dear friends, true friends, and nothing more."

"Agatha, what are you saying?" he asked, in a low vexed tone.

"What I mean, dear Noel. It was a mistake of yours to think you were in love with me; you did not know it was a mistake then, but you do now. It was a mistake of mine to feel myself in love with you, I ought to have known it even then; these things are plainer to women than to men. And so—in fact, Noel, I cannot settle down. I am a wandering, restless kind of person, and would rather only come here just to see you and your wife."

"And yet you take my wife away from me when I was just going to bring her here?"

"Not at all. I only take somebody away and leave room in your large, loving heart for a wife that is to come to you, mine own dear friend."

She could see his face but very indistinctly, and she could read little of the strange look that passed over it.

"Noel," she went on, in her most gentle tones, "no one hears us; no one will ever know what passed between us two to-night; but if I do not say one thing to you, you may be proud for my sake when I am gone, and make yourself and others more unhappy still. I have done

enough of that. Let me have done it all, and let me go to my own happiness, leaving happiness behind me too. I am a great deal older, Noel, than the child you love, but that shall make me only her truer friend. I shall come to her and to you, dear Noel, when I can; and seeing your happiness, shall rejoice that I—did not love you in that sort of way. I shall tell Mrs. Herman to-morrow, how I am fretting for foreign lands again, and must go back to poor Auntie; and, Noel, do not falter because of me, for I shall take care never to come back until—she is here. So you will be effectually keeping me away, you see."

As she spoke she turned towards the house, Noel beside her. But her quick steps lingered as she neared it.

"What do you say to me, before we go in?" she said, abruptly.

"It shocks me so to feel you have not loved me, Agatha," he said, quietly.

"Does it?" she answered, cheerfully. "Ah! well, there's no accounting for these things. The best thing is that I can love you always as I have always loved you—like a friend and sister. You want something rather more than that in your wife, dear Noel, don't you think so?"

"And you will not give me more than that?" he asked, almost wistfully.

"Never! nor can you give it me. That love God only gives us once, I think, in all our lives; and, oh when you feel it in your own heart, and win it in another, it is a thing to be grateful for all your life! Come in now, Noel; Mrs. Herman will wonder what keeps us."

As they separated in the hall that night, Agatha, giving Noel her hand, said with a little happy laugh, "Noel, you are not half so polite, nor half so handsome as Donald Kennard. If I had a brother like Don I should not look at you."

And Noel, laying his other hand on hers, looked down and answered: "You have read the secret there has been between us, dear. God bless you for the way you read it!"

Once more a group is gathered on the stone steps at the Maples, in the fair June sunset.

"I hope," said Mr. Kennard, looking up as Will began to wheel his chair from the bottom where he had stopped among them, "that Don will be in time to meet the train."

"No fear, papa; Don would run all the way sooner than miss it; it is due now," said Josie, from her corner, bending to him a face that was beautiful in its happiness. "It is so good to see him pleased and interested," she said to Major Herman, who sat below her.

"And other things are good too," he answered, quizzically.

"Yes; how good it is to think of the train just coming in; and, Freddy, you are there, are you? How good it is to see you well, my darling!"

The child had put his arms round her neck from behind, and Noel, leaning back, threw one arm round them both. "O Freddy," he said, "did you ever hear the fate of that boat in which the little fairy sailed with her twenty brothers—do you remember?"

"Yes, I do. What did it do, Noel?"

"It foundered, dear; it went down to the bottom of the sea."

"O Noel! and were they all killed and drowned?"

"Not one of them. It came up again with the brothers in it."

"And not the ugly little fairy?"

"Not the little fairy. No."

"She was an ugly little fairy, Noel."

"Was she? Oh, well, she wasn't in it."

"How bad, Noel!"

"Not at all, dear. Down at the bottom she had met with the Prince, who had been very lonely—you remember him, when he sailed away with a Princess, and they found that neither of them could live in anybody else's boat. So they came up to the top in the same."

"With the Princess?"

"No; she said she should like another, so she went on till she found one; but she often came into theirs for a sail."

"And weren't the twenty brothers sorry to lose the little fairy?"

"Well, they kept their boat alongside pretty well, I think," said Noel, with an irrepressible laugh in his eyes, "so it didn't matter."

"That was comfortable, wasn't it?" mused the child.

"Very—for everybody. But listen!"

Josie had darted through the open window, and Freddy after her, and Noel sat quietly where he was for a time, feeling that his presence was not needed just at first.

Before he had sat there very long he felt a hand upon each shoulder, and turned to meet an eager, boyish face and two small outstretched hands.

"Major Herman, you didn't turn away from me even *then*; will you speak to me now?"

"Jerome! dear old Jerry. I only waited for the others to meet you first. How glad I am to see you!"

"There are tears behind here that want to come," said Jerry, touching the back of his head, "but I suppose coming home is too happy a thing for tears to show their faces. I wish everybody wasn't so kind to me."

"No; you don't Jerry, so don't pretend it."

"I wish Don was like he used to be," said the boy with a great gulp, "and would put me down and cuff me."

"I don't," said Noel, placidly, "I like him better as he is."

"And I thought my father would turn away from me, and he kissed me twice."

"Yes, he is glad to have you back," said Noel, with perfect calmness.

"I'm very glad school isn't full of love like this," gasped Jerry at last, his mouth working pitifully at the corners, "because I want a bigger punishment."

After having left him these few minutes with Noel, they all followed him out, hovering round him till they were summoned in to the late supper-tea.

"I think, Josie darling," said Noel, as they two hesitated a minute on the steps, "that He whose ways are not our ways has worked all for good to these twenty brothers of yours."

"And to me too, Noel," she said, raising to him a happy face on which the sunset light rested lovingly.

And he answered very gravely, but straight up from his heart: "And to me too."

MARK HARDCASTLE.



MRS. THOMPSON'S WHITE WARE.

A HOMELY TALE.

MRS. THOMPSON stood by the kitchen table paring potatoes for dinner. Something was evidently wrong with the little lady, for there was an unmistakeable air of "spite" in the way she tossed the potatoes into the pan of cool spring water, waiting there to receive them. It was sultry weather; and through the open window came the sound of mowers whetting their scythes, blended with the call of the robin, and the faint notes of the cuckoo in the shaded wood. But it only irritated Mrs. Thompson—indeed everything irritated her that day. Looking out from the back door, might be seen a lovely landscape, with broad reaches of meadow-land, fringed with graceful belts of birch; and softly-rounded mountains lifting their velvety foreheads to the white, fleecy clouds, that went slowly sailing across the exquisite ether, like huge drifts of thistle-down. But this also irritated her; everything could be beautiful save *her* life, and that was cold, and rude, and barren. At least, Mrs. Thompson, in the plenitude of her present unsatisfactory mood, was telling herself that it was.

To begin at the beginning. Jane Lawrence had been an unusually romantic girl, and had gone for two years to a boarding-school. She had always fancied she would marry some famous artist or scholar, who would take her to Rome, and Venice, where she might live in a perpetual dream of beauty. She so loved beautiful things! Perhaps all women do; and that may be the reason so many are found ready to barter love for gold.

But, contrary to all her pre-conceived notions, she married Robert Thompson, a plain, practical farmer; and instead of touring it in Italy, she went to live at the old homestead, which had been the abode of the Thompsons for generations. Dreams and reality are so very different, you see.

Robert Thompson was a working farmer as well as a practical man, and all his people worked. His mother had worked in her day, his sisters had worked, he expected his wife to work. She took to it gleefully: she had not been brought up with high notions by any means; and at first the work did not seem so much. But every experienced lady knows how the labour seems to accumulate in a plain farmer's household as the years after marriage go on. There were plenty of men and boys about, but only one woman servant was kept; and Mrs. Robert Thompson grew to find she helped at nearly everything, save perhaps the very roughest of the labour. In place of lounging in elegant foreign

studios, or gliding down famed canals and streams in picturesque gondolas, she had butter and cheese to make, and poultry to rear, and dinners to cook in the long, low-ceiled kitchen, and the thousand and one cares upon her shoulders that make up a busy household. Quite a contrast; as must be admitted.

With things a little different, she'd not have minded the work so much: could she have had nice carpets and tasteful furniture, and books, and a picture or two, and flowers. The home was so very hard and practical, and its surroundings were getting so shabby. At first she had not noticed this, or cared for it; but every year, as the years went on, made matters look dingier. Old Mrs. Thompson had not cared to be smart and nice; Robert never thought about it. And what though he had?—it is only natural for men to assume that what had done for a mother would do for a wife. In time Mrs. Robert Thompson began to ask that some renovation should take place; at which Robert only stared: the house that had done without painting so long, could do yet; and the old things in it were good enough for them. She did not venture to urge the point: but she did press for some flowers. There was a strip of ground under the south parlour windows where a shrub of sweet-brier grew, and pinks, sweet-williams, and marigolds blossomed in their season. But they were old-fashioned, common flowers; and she pined for the rare and elegant plants she had seen in conservatories and public gardens. But Robert Thompson would as soon have thought of buying the moon, as such useless things as flowers. The garden, like himself, was all practical, filled with cabbages, onions, potatoes, and sweet herbs. And so went on her unlovely existence; in which dissatisfaction was becoming a very night-mare. Now and again, on those somewhat rare occasions when she went out to visit her neighbours, and saw how pretty many of them had things, she came home more than ever out of heart. The worst was (or the best) there was no real reason why a little money should not be spent in making the home prettier and happier, for Robert Thompson was doing well, and putting fairly by. But understanding had not come into the man: and his wife was too meek, perhaps too constitutionally timid to make trouble over it.

The matter to-day—which had put her so very much out—was this. A sewing-club had recently been established in the neighbourhood. There was much distress amidst the poor labourers' wives and families, and some ladies with time on their hands set up a sewing-club, to make a few clothes for the nearly naked children. The farmers' wives had joined it; Mrs. Thompson amidst others; they met at stated intervals, taking the different houses in rotation: dining at home at twelve, assembling at one o'clock, and working steadily for several hours. It was surprising how much work got done; how many little petticoats and frocks were made in the long afternoons. In less than a month it

would be Mrs. Thompson's turn to receive the company—for the first time—and she naturally began to consider ways and means. For they met for an entertainment as well as for sewing: tea in the afternoon, a grand meal later when the stitching was over.

What was Mrs. Thompson to do? Their stock of plates and dishes consisted of a few odds and ends of cracked delf, that had once been a kind of mulberry colour. She had long wanted some new white ware: she wanted it more than ever now. Grover, the keeper of the village crockery shop, had a lovely set for sale: white, with a delicate sprig of convolvuli and fuchsias: looking every bit as good as real china. Mrs. Thompson had set her heart on the set, and that morning had broached the subject to her husband.

"What's the matter with the old ones?" asked he.

"Look at them," she answered. "They are frightfully old and shabby."

"I daresay the food will taste as well off them as off Grover's set of white ware."

"But there's not half enough. We have as good as none left."

"Mother had some best china. Where is it?"

"That's nearly all gone. We couldn't put the two on the table together."

"Why not?"

"Oh Robert! Look at *this*. It is the shabbiest old lot ever seen."

"'Twas good enough for mother."

Mrs. Robert Thompson disdained comment.

"You'd not have thought of this but for the sewing circle having to come here. If they can't come and eat from such dishes as we've got, they are welcome to stay away."

There were tears in Mrs. Thompson's eyes. But she crowded them bravely back. He took his hat to go out to his mowing.

"We really want the things, Robert. Those at Grover's are very cheap. I can get all I want for a mere trifle: do give me the money."

"Grover'll have to keep 'em for us: I've got no money to waste on fine china," returned the farmer. "By the way"—looking back from the door—"Jones and Lee are coming to give me a helping hand. I want to get the south meadow down to-day if I can, it's a famous heavy crop: so I shall bring them in to dinner. Oh, and the Hubbards want six pounds of butter to-night: don't forget to have it ready."

With these words, Mr. Robert Thompson had marched off, leaving his wife to her long, weary day's work, darkened and made distasteful by her disappointment. She was both grieved and angry. It was a little thing, perhaps, but it is the little things of life that delight or annoy.

Existence seemed very bare and homely to Jane Thompson that summer day. With her love of ease, and beauty, and symmetry, how rude, and coarse, and hard looked all her surroundings. It was only

one long, monotonous round of homely toil, unrelieved by any of the little sweetnesses and graces that might make even toil pleasant. She did not often think of it; but she remembered that day, with the faintest little air of regret, that she *might* have been far differently situated; and as she looked up to the pretty French cottage on the hill, embowered in a perfect forest of blossoming vines, and caught the cool gleam of urn and fountain, something very like a sigh trembled on her lips. "Squire Burnham's wife does not have to *beg* for a paltry bit of money to set out her table decently," she thought rebelliously.

And then, in her spirit of aggrievement, she mentally went over the other things she needed, and that Robert knew *were* needed. Why was life to be all toil and bare ugliness? There was no reason: he had plenty of money. A new carpet for the best parlour; paper for the walls, so stained with time; whitewash; paint; some fresh chintz; she remembered it all, as she toiled through the long sultry forenoon with an aching head and discouraged heart. It happened to be washing-day: and on those days she took all the work, that Molly might not be disturbed in her help at the tubs.

What business had she to marry Robert Thompson? she asked herself, her slender wrists beating away at the butter for the Hubbards. For in the green and gloomy light that Mrs. Robert Thompson looked at things to-day, she quite forgot the fact that she had fallen in love with the honest, steady and good-looking young farmer, choosing him in preference to Joe Burnham, whom she might have had. Joe had a patrimony of his own: two hundred a year at least, and a good bit of land, which he rented, and was called "Squire," as his father had been before him. He wanted to marry Jane Lawrence, and she would not: likes and dislikes cannot be controlled, and she cared more for Robert Thompson's little finger than for the whole of poor, under-sized Joe. Squire Burnham found another wife: and Mrs. Thompson, this weary day, was furiously envying her. Mrs. Burnham would come amidst the rest of the sewing-club too, and see the miserable shabbiness of the mulberry-ware and the home generally. The butter got beaten savagely at the thought.

Robert Thompson was not an unkind man: only thoughtless. He was a type of a very large class, more especially farmers, who do not feel the need of life's rugged pathway being softened with flowers. Absorbed in his stock, his crops, his money getting, he did not realize how monotonous was his wife's life at home. He had his recreations: the weekly market; gossip with his brother farmers; politics: she had nothing but work and care. He did not realize the truth that the worn, shabby home *told* upon her; that she needed some brightening to come to it as a yearning want of life. And so, as the years had gone on, she grew dissatisfied at heart, hardly understanding what she wished for or what she did not wish: the intensely unlovely prosy, dull life somewhat

souring her spirits. Now and again, when she gave back a short or bitter retort, Robert wondered : she who used to be so sweet-tempered.

All through the long forenoon, Mrs. Thompson nursed her wrath. Robert was selfish and unreasonable, and she did not care who knew it. She *would not* have the sewing-club at the farm, come what might. The potatoes got boiled ; the big piece of beef was simmering on the fire. Before twelve o'clock had well struck, she saw her husband and his two friends coming through the orchard, with red and hungry faces. Mr. Thompson always wanted his dinner boiling hot : and she hastened to lay the cloth in the cool room off the kitchen. Frank and Charley, her two boys, came rushing in from school, each striving to claim her attention. She felt tired, heated, and very cross.

"Why ! isn't dinner ready ?" demanded Mr. Thompson, not seeing it actually on the table when he entered. "I told you we had no time to waste to-day," he added angrily in his hurry and hunger. "If I hadn't anything to do all the forenoon but get dinner, I'd have it ready to time, I know."

A bitter retort was springing to her lips : but ere it could be spoken, Charley clamorously interposed, pushing his new copy book before her eyes.

"Look, mother ! I am going into sentences now, like Frank. It's my first copy. The master wrote it ; and he said I was to get it by heart too, and always remember it. Do read it, mother."

Mrs. Thompson, her arms full of the cracked old mulberry plates, paused a moment to let her eyes fall on the new copy. "A soft answer turneth away wrath," was what she read. It was not that the proverb was new : she had read it scores of times : but there was something in its *appropriateness* to the present moment, that fell like a cool sweet wind on her heated pulses.

"I will have it ready in a moment, Robert," she said quietly.

Mr. Robert Thompson looked up. Evidently he had not expected so pleasant a reply. If the truth must be told, he had thought a good bit that morning of his wife's request about the white ware. Not in the way of granting it ; but that she would probably be sulky over it when they got in to dinner.

"It doesn't feel here as it does in that blazing meadow," he remarked to his friends, as they went into the cool North room to dinner.

"Folks that can keep in-doors this weather have an easy time of it : they don't know what heat is."

Mrs. Thompson wondered whether this was a slap at her. Her face looked scarlet enough for any amount of heat. As to sitting down with them, she had enough to do to wait on the party. It was washing-day, and Molly must not be called.

"This butter must have been kept in the kitchen : it's like oil," said Mr. Thompson.

"I took it out of the cellar since you came in: I will go down and get some more if you think I had better," was the reply, given pleasantly.

"Never mind. Well I declare!—do you call this meat boiled?" went on Mr. Thompson as he began to carve. "It's harder than a rock. If meat has to be cooked pretty fresh this weather, it needn't be like this."

"I tried to have it nice, Robert," she said, striving to choke down a rising sob—as well as an angry word.

Mr. Thompson, aroused by a quiver in the tone, looked at his wife: his friends glanced at one another. She sat down at length, but could not eat. Mr. Thompson finished his dinner in silence.

He was watching his wife's face: there was something in it he did not understand—a kind of patient, hopeless look, as if she no longer cared to struggle onwards. The old mulberry ware *did* look dingy on the snowy white table-cloth; almost too bad for these chums of his to sit down to: he wondered he had never thought so before. Robert Thompson grew thoughtful.

He passed into the kitchen when they were going out again—how hot and stifling it felt with that big fire—as bad as the south meadow. His wife had been in it cooking: that must have made her face scarlet. In-doors was not so comfortable a place, after all, if you had hot work to do, was the idea that flitted through his mind. And—perhaps the work was over-much for his wife, who at best was but a delicate woman.

A fresh, cool breeze had sprung up from the South, as he went out, walking slowly; but the sun was burning hot still. Robert Thompson waited to wipe his brows: and in that moment the voices of his comrades came towards him from the other side of the hedge, where they stood in the little shade it cast.

"I never pitied a woman so much in my life," quoth one of them. "She works like a slave and does not get even 'thank ye' for it from Thompson. He's a good fellow, but uncommon down upon the work. Strong as a horse himself, he thinks, I suppose, women must be the same."

"Yes, Bob's a sterling good fellow, but Jane Lawrence made a mistake when she said Yes to his asking," cried the other. "Jones, she wasn't cut out for a farmer's wife—especially one who keeps his folks to it like Thompson does. She's over sensitive—delicate: any lady but her would have turned long ago and bid him give her proper help. He won't make his money out of her many years if he don't take better care of her: she'll run down fast. Awfully changed, she is. She looks as faded as the old house rooms—and they haven't seen a coat o' paint since grandfather Thompson's day."

"Ah, she'd better have took Joe Burnham. The Lawrences used to

have things nice in their home, and she'd have got 'em so still, if she'd married Joe. His wife's just gone out in her pony-chay. I say, Jones, I wonder whether Thompson's wife's ever sorry?"

Was she? The unconscious comments of these, his warm friends, came crushing down on Robert Thompson's heart and brain like a bolt of fire. That she rejected Burnham for him, he knew, when she came home to the old homestead, and took care of his invalid mother. Tenderly had she done it, too. And—could she be wearing out her life in hard work for him; she, the mother of his boys; she whom he loved well, for all his churlishness? Robert Thompson stole away: he could bear his thoughts no longer: and he felt that he could almost kill himself for his blind heedlessness.

The afternoon wore on towards evening. Mrs. Thompson had finished her indoor-work—the washing up of the dinner dishes and the putting of the rooms straight—and was going in with an armful of fine things that she had taken from the clothes lines, when the sound of wheels made her look round.

"I've brought that white ware, Mrs. Thompson," said the brisk voice of Grover, springing from his cart, and lifting down carefully a large hamper.

"But I didn't order it, Mr. Grover," she rejoined in rather a frightened voice.

"The master did, though. Mr. Thompson came down this afternoon and said the things was to come up to you at once. There's the dinner set you admired, and a tea set as well. Where shall I put 'em?"

"Bring them in please," she answered rather faintly. He did as he was bid, and then drove off.

Mrs. Thompson sat down by the hamper of crockery and cried as if her heart would break. They were magical tears, too, for they washed all the weariness and despair from her face, and the shadow from her eyes and heart. She forgot that she was tired, or that the day was hot: she only thought how kind Robert was, and what a wicked woman she had been for saying to herself in her temper that she'd rather have had Squire Burnham. Then she unpacked the treasures, pulling them out from amidst the hay, and singing softly all the while. Oh, it was beautiful, that ware!—with its clear opaque white, and here and there a delicate tracing of fuchsia or convolvulus.

Mr. Thompson came in and found her in the midst. "What is it, Jenny?" he asked—the old fond name he used to call her.

"O, Robert!" taking a step towards him. He opened his arms and drew her close to his heart, kissing her as fondly and tenderly as he ever had in the days of his courtship.

"I have been a brute, little wife," he whispered, huskily. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgive you? O, Robert! I never was so happy in my life!

I have been to blame, I have not been as patient and kind as I might."

"Yes, you have. You've been an angel compared to me. I have made a slave of you; but all that is over now. I did not *think*, Jenny; I did not indeed."

"But—Robert——"

"You shall have more help in the house, another servant. We'll get her in, Jenny, long before the sewing-club night comes round."

"Oh, Robert, how kind you are! I feel as light as a bird."

"And you *are* almost," he answered, smiling a little sadly as he looked into her eager face. "We'll ail turn over a new leaf, Jane. Heaven knows I did not mean to be cruel."

"Robert, you were never that."

"Well—we'll let it be: bygones shall be bygones if you will. Oh, and I forgot to say that I saw Leeds this afternoon. It's a very dull time just now, the poor fellow says, without a job on hand, so I thought I'd give him one. They'll be here to begin to-morrow morning."

"You—are—not going to have the house done up?" she exclaimed in wild surprise.


"Every square inch of it. And, once the painting and that's finished we'll see what else we can do to make it look a bit brighter."

She hardly believed it; she burst into tears. "And I have been so wicked!" she cried. Only to-day I had quite wicked thoughts, Robert. I was envying Mrs. Burnham; I was feeling angry with everybody. It was the discouragement, Robert."

"Yes, it was the discouragement," he said quite humbly. "We will do better for the future, Jane: I'll try another plan."

She cried silently for a minute longer; soft, happy tears; feeling that light had superseded the darkness.

"And it has all arisen from my trying to carry out for a bit that blessed proverb—'A soft answer turneth away wrath!'" she murmured. "Robert, did you ever before see such lovely white ware?"



A LOST LIFE.

THE following is an unhappy episode of the late American war. It is strictly true. Many more such might be related.

"I don't know what to say to it," exclaimed Miss Martha Tods, giving her gown a twitch in various places, according to a habit she had when excited in any great degree.

Now if Miss Martha Tods did not know what to say, and confessed it, doubtless the subject was of grave difficulty: for no lady in the State—taking her at her own estimate—had sharper sense or tongue; and an uncertain, puzzled expression lay on her pointed features.

Her sister Ann, a weak, helpless little woman, sat by the western window picking a pan of dried beans. In doubt also: for she never presumed to make up her mind until Miss Martha had told her how. The family qualities, as well as the silver and linen, were divided between these two sisters; the energy, decision and sharpness going to the elder; and the easy good-nature, the self-denial and work, to the younger.

The sisters were not alone in the great yellow-washed kitchen, with its freshly-scoured floor, and its queer cupboards stuck in corners like hornets' nests. There was also a fair young woman, with a round pleasant face, which wore a strange anxiety as she looked from one to the other.

"I have made up my mind; and if you do not think well to aid me I must do without your aid," said she at last, in a gentle, timid voice but one, nevertheless, of decision. "I can't help myself."

Miss Martha gave her gown another twitch. "And suppose you were found out?"

"I should manage better than that."

"You don't know, Laura. I haven't much question in my own mind but what I could go from Dan to Beersheba in men's clothes, without a soul's mistrusting me," she continued. "But it is not every woman who could act a part as well as myself."

It was a strange thought, an extraordinary resolution, that this poor young woman, Laura Seavercoal, had taken to herself. Her husband had gone to fight in the war, lured by the prospect of great pay and great fame, just as so many other husbands had gone; and things had come to a crisis with her. She had struggled on with her two children until she could struggle no longer. Her husband could send her no

more money, he wanted money from her: he had been taken prisoner. She thought, in her brave heart, that she might earn some money by dressing herself in man's clothes and doing man's labour. There was a field for *that*—the flower of the men being at the war: and it was well paid for. For women's work there was none: and she thought it would be no shame as it was for *him*. So she took her resolve; and had come to-night to these true-hearted women to tell of it, and crave their help. Naturally, Miss Martha, with all her strong-mindedness, was taken aback.

"What I am most afraid of, is this—that your strength won't stand to do man's work, even if you manage to pass yourself off for one," said Miss Ann.

"I am naturally strong and healthy, and since Harmon went into the army I have done his work as well as mine," answered the young wife, her blue eyes lighting up with their renewed resolution. "It's not any fear of wanting strength that would keep me from it."

"I should not like the thought of putting off my own dress," said Miss Ann, looking thoughtfully at her beans.

"I don't *like* it either, Miss Ann, but what am I to do? It's not the keep of me and the little ones—I'd manage that if it was next door to starvation; but it is the money for Harmon. He says he needs all I can send him: how am I to get it? A woman's earnings would not be much towards it: a man's would be enough for everything. Nobody will hire me to do the work of a man in a woman's dress; and even if I *did* the same work, they would not think of paying me more than a third as much for it. I *must* live; I must take care of the children; I must earn money to send Harmon until he is released, and able to get his pay; and I don't know any way to do it, except the one I've thought of."

She had a cheerful heart as well as a brave one, and she said nothing of the weariness and hardships she had struggled through before coming to this desperate decision.

"Have you told your folks about your plan?" queried Miss Martha.

"My *folks*! Of course not. Nobody, but you. Mother and the girls do not even know Harmon has been taken prisoner, or that he is sick, and I wouldn't have them. If they knew it, they could not help me. Mother worried herself half to death when he enlisted; and she has enough to bear up under without taking me on her shoulders."

"She always *was* a nervous piece," was Miss Martha Tod's cheerful rejoinder. "I remember her before you were born; and I'll tell you what, Laura, you are having a hard bed to hoe, and I am willing to do what I can to help you if you are sure you can manage it so as not to be found out."

"I *will* manage it. If it had not been for the children, I never need have told a soul."

"Children is encumbrances at the best ; and I don't much take to 'em myself," said Miss Martha. "But yours seem to be well brought up and pretty behaved, and so I'll consent to what you ask, and let you leave 'em here for a spell. But the course you've got marked out for yourself is a venture, Laura Seavercoal."

"You won't need to worry a single moment about the children," cheerily interrupted Miss Ann. "I love children, and I'll love them. And if you find your strength gets overtaxed, Laura, you must leave the work and come here straight away from it," she added, rattling a handful of beans into the pan. "Pretty little dears ! we'll do the best we ever can for them."

"I'm not afraid of overtaxing my strength," repeated Laura, her fair young cheeks flushing with hope.

Which Miss Martha saw fit to damp. She held up her finger warningly and spoke in a measured tone.

"Don't you boast, Laura Seavercoal. If your plan fails, it will be through your strength—and mind, I tell it you. A woman is not made to do man's rough work. I'm not sure, either, but this is an evil thing to do. And we may not do evil that good may come."

Perhaps Miss Martha was right. Yet evil was never done that good might come with a purer heart and more unselfish motive than when Laura Seavercoal went forth, clothed in falsehood, to work for those who were dearer to her than life.

Miss Ann Tods, who could turn her hand to the making of anything from a shoe to a bonnet, set about and completed a suit of boy's clothes. Nobody saw them ; nobody knew who they were for, not even the two little ones looking on.

In the grey of an evening twilight, Mrs. Pim, the nearest neighbour towards the north, saw from her pantry window, by which she stood mixing biscuit in a wooden bowl, a boy drawing a wheelbarrow into her door-yard. She knew the old blue wheelbarrow well enough, for it was Mr. Pim's, her own, too, for that matter, and had been lent to Miss Ann Tods to take home her bag of meal that came with Mr. Pim's grist from the mill. But she didn't know the boy. And this was a place so small, and so out of the way among the hills, with so little happening in it, that a strange cat, or a dead sheep, was a nine weeks' talk.

"He is a stranger to me," decided Mrs. Pim. "Nobody belonging hereaways ; and I can't think for the life of me, what relation or acquaintance he can be of the Tods," said she, raising the window and putting out her head for a better sight.

"What sort of a looking fellow is he ?" asked Mrs. Pim's mother-in-law, who was afflicted, and could not easily get to the window to reconnoitre for herself.

"Short and fair, with longish hair ; and there is something wonderful curious about his gait. I don't know but what I will take over a baske

of russets to the Tods to-morrow—likely their apples are all gone—and find out, by the way, who he is," concluded Mrs. Pim.

Accordingly, with the morrow, she departed on her neighbourly errand, and came back as wise as she went. Which to a curious-minded lady like Mrs. Pim, was anything but satisfactory.

"You can't ever get anything out of those old-maid Tods when they've not a mind to let you; no, not though you took a hammer and a pair of nippers to it," said she on her return. "All I could find out was, that he is a boy of the name of George Snyder, from down below; and that Martha Tods knew his family and him when she stopped there such a while with her brother's folks. The boy's come to try to get into work round here. He'll soon do that if he's smart."

"Haven't he got work down his way?" asked the old mother. "Work needn't go a-begging since the war."

"That's all I made out, for they didn't incline to talk much about the whys and the wherefores of his coming; and what is the curiousest part of all, they've got two little children, a little boy and a little girl, to board; but who they belong to, and how they happened to get hold of them, I couldn't ascertain. Martha always likes to make a seven days' wonder of nothing at all, and Ann don't dare say her soul is her own any time."

While Mrs. Pim was telling the story of her unsatisfactory researches, Mr. Burlingame, an extensive lumber-dealer in a large town some miles away upon the river, in driving down the road leading from the village, overtook a blue-eyed boy with delicate hands and innocent face. The boy turned to approach the waggon, and Mr. Burlingame stopped his horse.

"Do you wish to hire a hand, sir?" said he.

"Are you the hand?" returned Mr. Burlingame, who had a fixed aversion to answering a straight-forward question in a straight-forward way.

"Yes, sir," replied the boy.

"You don't look like a very stout one," said Mr. Burlingame.

"If you will try me you will find I am. I have been at school for awhile, and am a little out of practice just now, but shall soon get toughened," answered the boy, glancing at his soft, white hands.

"How are your habits? Good? Ever smoke, or drink, or play cards?"

"Never. I have no bad habits," the boy replied modestly, but decidedly.

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"You look more than that," returned Mr. Burlingame, gazing sharply at the beardless cheeks. "What is your name?"

"George Snyder."

Then Mr. Burlingame made a pause. He was always slow of speech, and he waited long enough for one of your quick men to indite his will before he answered.

"Well, George, I am driving out to my mill at Scrooley; if you want to try and see what you can do at such kind of work, you may come out."

"Yes, sir. Thank you," replied George.

When Mr. Burlingame arrived at Scrooley, he found the boy, who had come out on the train, there before him, and already at work, having set himself to piling boards. He appointed him what he was to do: and so George Snyder entered on his trial. Mr. Burlingame soon found George had told the truth in saying he had none of the bad habits common in boys of that age, and that he was ready and faithful in every sort of work. But he appeared to be curiously weak.

"George is as reliable and energetic a boy as I could ask for, only he has not the strength," remarked Mr. Burlingame as the time went on, one day that he was looking over a wood-lot with his partner. "He takes hold of the log with the best will in the world, and lifts away at it; but the log doesn't come up. I don't know what to do about it. The boy *can't* earn his wages, though I am persuaded he does just as well as he can, and never flinches for blisters or bruises. I hate to turn him off when he tries so hard, and seems so anxious to please."

"Seems to me he has not been used to work, hard or soft," observed the partner. "Where does he come from?"

"He tells me he was left an orphan at twelve years old; has had himself to take care of ever since, and is trying to earn money to go through college. He really does seem to have a superior mind. I offered him some books from my library, and he selected Paley's 'Natural Theology,' and Miss Whiting's Memoirs—hardly what you would expect of a boy of his age. He looks healthy and appears capable; quick to understand any work shown to him, apt to learn. But there's the lack of physical power. When Mrs. Young, who boards the men, was sick one day, he tended and helped her as handy as a woman. And he is first-rate at all kinds of house-work."

"You don't want to pay a boy to do house-work," growled the partner.

"Of course not. But he seems to lack muscle for aught heavier. And it really goes against me to turn him away."

"Why wouldn't he enlist, and be off our hands and *on* our quota?" suggested the partner.

This was in the last year of the war, when calls for soldiers came often and loud, and one more on the town's quota was gladly counted in. Thus, for two reasons, the idea pleased Mr. Burlingame. He called George into the house the next day to talk to him about it, and

found him apparently very willing to enlist; but there was a difficulty. No volunteers were received under eighteen.

"They would be fools not to take me," said George, his heart beating under his vest. "But they won't."

"They would never think of disputing it if you give your age as eighteen," said Mr. Burlingame, with another sharp glance at the smooth face, which somehow held marks of maturity on it, and which, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed had seen as many years as that.

Then his wife, who sat by with her sewing-machine, spoke up, shocked and vehement—she was a hot-tempered woman. "You certainly wouldn't dare tell a lie for the sake of enlisting, George Snyder. You couldn't expect a blessing on it if you did, for nobody gains anything by falsehood in the end, if they do in the beginning."

I have wondered if the conscience of the boy was moved by this accidental commentary on his every-day life, or if he had gone on so long in its falseness that the reproof and prophecy did not touch him. However it was, he gave no sign; and nothing more was said then.

Something after nine of the clock, upon the same evening, Miss Martha Tods and her sister sat in their long, low kitchen, with a small round table between them, on which was a tallow candle in a painted candlestick, a pair of tin snuffers, and a porringer of water.

Miss Martha was braiding the crown of a palm-leaf hat, and Miss Ann was doing the more difficult and disagreeable part of "setting up a top," according to their usual division in all kinds of labour.

A great earthen jar stood on the wide window-sill, filled with clover-blossoms, asparagus branches, speckled field-lilies, and scarlet peonies. From the maple-tree, outside the window, came in the shrill cry of a persistent katydid, harmonizing with mingled chirpings, and fings and dronings from hundreds of summer creatures, who were thus telling, each in its way, its gladness in the universal warmth and sweetness, unknowing and heedless of the swift to-morrow, which can prove so biting, and bitter, and unkindly, to us and them. But the flowers and the insects made up all the poetry of the time and place. The rest was plain prose of the homeliest sort.

"It was a downright relief to me when Pollina came to fetch away Mrs. Pim this afternoon," remarked Miss Ann. "She is so inquisitive that I have had to tell her more than fifty lies a-ready, I do believe: and it goes against my feelings to tell so many for *nothing*," added the speaker as though she thought there *had* been cases since the time of Sapphira, when a lie had brought profit to the owner.

"A fig for Mrs. Pim," retorted Miss Martha.

"I am always afraid I shall let out something to her. What with her eyes, and what with her questions, when she's before me, I feel just as though I was walking on eggs or china tea-cups."

Miss Martha wet her straws in the porringer with a sniff of contempt.

"I never could abide Mrs. Pim any way. Unless she's trying to ferret out something, she can only talk about her palm-leaf pedler, her braiding, and her straw, and whether I 'thumb it' or not. Such conversation's not edifying to *me*."

Of course not, with Miss Martha's large stock of sense! The silence that ensued was interrupted by a sudden knock on the outer door. The sisters started in their chairs, and looked at each other as though they half expected it might be Mrs. Pim's avenging spirit. Miss Martha, who was supposed to be the keeper of the castle, always saying "I" and "mine," ventured to the window, and carefully putting away a corner of the white half-curtain, peered out into the starlight.

"It is too dark for me to make out anything for positive," said she, in a whisper.

Then as the knock came again, louder and more imperative, she went to the door and asked through the keyhole, in a tone as gruff as though it belonged to *two* men—"Who is it?"

"Me. Let me in, won't you?" replied the person outside, impatiently.

"Doesn't that sound like *her* voice?" inquired Miss Ann.

"You mean *his*?" corrected Miss Martha, who was never caught off her guard even in the silence of her own thoughts.

"Yes, yes, I *mean its*," replied Miss Ann, hastily. Miss Ann was always better at heart than she was at grammar, and these mixed pronouns utterly confused her.

"It is me—George Snyder. Do open the door," added the voice, plaintively.

So the fastenings were removed. First a great japanned salver, which was expected to clatter over and act as alarum in case a burglar should attempt to enter by the door; then a bolt, a hook, and two buttons.

"So it is *you*! You gave us quite a scare, for we didn't expect you more than the dead," said Miss Martha, when the door was fairly opened.

"Yes, it is me, and I have walked all the way from Lansing since supper," said the wayfarer, sinking down on the nearest seat. "How are the children?"

"Poor thing!" She must be clean beat out! murmured Miss Ann. "Oh! the children are brisk as butterflies. They are doing *nice*," she continued, fluttering about to bring forward the easiest rocking-chair.

"There, you sit here."

And the wearied limbs obeyed as if mechanically. Miss Ann brought out a glass of milk and a plate of pie.

"Don't you think it is too much for you, to take such a long walk after doing your day's work?"

"I do find lumbering rather heavy, and I should have tried for something lighter before now if it were not for staying near the children. However, I can probably get as good wages, with less work, by going a

little farther away ; and I suppose I shall have to do it," continued the poor mother, with her heart of self-sacrifice beating under the boy's suit of elephant grey.

"You mustn't get overdone. And remember, you won't need to have a speck of worry about the children ; we will take good care of them," said Miss Ann, cheerfully.

"But I shall have to go elsewhere. They are finding me not strong enough for the place, and I am not sure but they are doubting me."

"I can tell you, Mr. Burlingame evidently has a mistrust of something out of the common," spoke Miss Martha, sharply. "He came over one day and asked what I knew of your early history, saying he had observed you came here pretty often in an evening. I was taken to, and had to put out my ready wits. I told him it was natural you should come, as you knew nobody else in these parts, and that I was braiding a hat for you besides and had to try it on, having made it at first too big. He seemed satisfied and went away : but you'll have to be wonderful sharp and cautious."

"So I am."

"If you get found out, I expect nothing but what folks would lay the fault on me—though I don't see how I am to blame, seeing you are bent on working out for men's wages, whether I give countenance to it or not," said Miss Martha, a little fretfully. And, to tell the truth, what with the children being, as she said, "wearing" to her, and this other anxiety, she had not from the beginning found the secret pleasant to her feet.

"Martha, she's finding the work too hard. I'm afraid it's killing her," whispered Miss Ann, with frightened eyes, when the wearied guest was gone to rest.

"Oh, nonsense ! work don't kill anybody," retorted strong Miss Martha. "What's trying her is the fear of being found out."

Dawn had scarcely begun to break the next morning, when Laura Seavercoal kissed her sleeping babies, and putting on George Snyder's grey suit, started on her way back to Lansing. She went out of her road to call at a town post-office, lest haply there might be a letter for her from her husband. One was handed to her, written briefly and hurriedly, from the wretchedness of a Southern war-prison, beginning "Dear Laura and children." He was still a prisoner, and was lying grievously sick and hopeless.

A mist came over her eyes, in which she seemed to see, as in a glance, the happy cottage home, so full of content and peace, that had been theirs before the war began. It had been swept away for ever. For ever ? Something within her seemed to say so ; and her heart felt as if it were being swept away after it.

The letter implored her to send him money. She hardly saw how she was to do it. If she could but get more remunerative work else-

where, no matter how hard, so that it were greater pay! Her spirit felt good to do any amount, and she could but hope she should find the strength.

Back to Mr. Burlingame's lumber-yard, and to the day's toil. Never had George Snyder seemed less capable of doing it; and certain ominous words, touching on dismissal, fell from the master. Upon that, the boy, seeing what must come, expressed his wish to leave and look elsewhere for employment, and received his discharge and pay forthwith. Save a little of it sent for the use of the children, and a pittance abstracted for present necessity, the money was dispatched for the use of the husband. It reached him safely; and he thought what a good, capable, self-reliant wife he had, and never guessed at what a price it was earned.

But Miss Ann Tods was right. The unfit work was slowly killing Laura Seavercoal.

George Snyder got first a few days' at haying; but it was too hard for him: he was expected to do as much as a grown man. Some time after that, a boy, looking about sixteen or seventeen, applied for employment at some iron-works at Bedford, some thirty miles distance from Lansing. Mr. Glass, the agent, declined to give it him: he looked too frail for shovelling and wheeling ore. But the boy returned, and pleaded so hard that he was taken on. Poor creature! He had tried faithfully to get some easier place in printing-offices and stores, and had not been able.

George Snyder did his best there, taxing his failing strength fatally. All connected with the iron-works became thoroughly interested in the intelligent, modest, industrious, and fragile-looking lad, and in his story; nearly the same which had already touched Mr. Burlingame's sympathies. But woman is not organised to do man's work: at any rate, Laura Seavercoal was not: and her frame made protest at last. She had been living upon next to nothing, too, dividing her money between her husband and children.

One day, George Snyder crawled away to his solitary bed—it consisted but of two blankets—and lay down there in mortal sickness, dying after a few days of suffering and delirium. Then, by letters found amid his effects, the sad story was disclosed of one who had sunk from over-exertion, and been sacrificed for those she loved.

"We may not do evil that good may come; and it was nothing but deceit all along," groaned Miss Martha Tods.

But Miss Ann's hot tears dropped unsparingly. "Heaven is more merciful in its judgment than man, sister: it will forgive such deceit as this."

A few months afterwards, when Harmon Seavercoal gained his release, he came home to find his faithful wife in a green grave, and only his two children left to welcome him.